



UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Department of Informatics

**Social Status and Hierarchies in
Virtual Worlds**

A Study of World of Warcraft

Master thesis

60 credits

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Summary

English

On an overall scale, this thesis investigates how game mechanics influence the social components of a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game such as World of Warcraft. To better illustrate this, the focus has been narrowed down to a qualitative study in the form of a virtual ethnography of how game mechanics in correlation with social aspects create social status and hierarchies in the game. Central to this thesis is also exploring how virtual social status can function as a motivation for why players invest so much time in the game. The results of the study indicate that the desire to gain social status and to rise in the virtual hierarchy. The competition for social success and recognition is a way for players to assert themselves among the thousands of other players in the game. The results also indicate that social success in the game can entail negative effects in addition to the positive.

Norsk

Denne masteroppgaven undersøker på et overhengende nivå hvordan spillmekanikker påvirker de sosiale komponentene i et Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game som World of Warcraft. For å bedre illustrere dette, er fokuset i oppgaven snevret ned til en kvalitativ undersøkelse i form av en virtuell etnografi av hvordan spillmekanikker sammen med sosiale aspekter bidrar til å skape sosial status og hierarkier i spillet. Sentralt i denne oppgaven er også å undersøke hvordan virtuell sosial status kan fungere som en motiverende faktor for spillere, og hvorfor de bruker så mye tid på spillet. Resultatet av studien viser at spillere har en trang til å vinne sosial status og stige i det virtuelle hierarkiet. Konkurransen over sosial suksess og anerkjennelse er en måte for spillere å hevde seg i et spill med tusenvis av andre spillere. Resultatene av studien viser også at sosial suksess i spillet kan medføre negative konsekvenser i tillegg til de mer positive

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Social status and hierarchies in Virtual Worlds: *A study of World of Warcraft*

1. Introduction

Ever since I jumped on my first mushroom in Super Mario Bros back in 1987, I have loved playing computer games. I have lost track of all the nights in my childhood where I forced myself to stay awake to complete several levels or kill bosses to get a sense of accomplishment. What made these games so immersive were their solid and addictive gameplay. There was, however, something entirely different that kept me playing my first multiplayer online game, World of Warcraft, for hours on end. In the beginning, it was fun to explore the game's massive world and get new equipment, levels and new abilities, but as I progressed to the maximum level, it was not just the gameplay or the game's mechanics that kept me playing, it was also the social aspects, both the good sides and the bad.

This thesis is a study of how game mechanics and the social aspects in the massively multiplayer online role-playing¹ game World of Warcraft influence each other. The main focus encompassing this thesis will be how virtual social status and hierarchies work as a component of gameplay.

¹ MMORPGs or Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games are played over the internet through PC or gaming consoles such as Playstation 3 and Xbox 360. Players connect through their game software where all graphics and code are installed to a centralized server(s) where the virtual world and the player's game characters (avatars) are being stored.

1.1 Relevant research

Games and the importance of playing have been defined as a basic human activity that helps define culture (Huizinga 1950). The play element of culture and society was first introduced by the historian, cultural theorist and Professor Johan Huizinga in his book “Homo Ludens”². (Huizinga 1950). The academic interest in games first accelerated during the 1980’s when videogames become more popular with the releases of such games as Space Invaders (1978), Pac-Man (1980), Donkey Kong (1981) etc. as well as consoles (i.e. Commodore 64, NES) becoming available to the home entertainment market. (Herz 1997:14-21)

During the late 1990’s a genre known as MMOG’s or Multi Player Online Games became increasingly popular due to games such as Ultima Online (1997), Underlight (1998) and EverQuest (1999). These games distinguished themselves from earlier traditional games as they had no defined goal. The biggest difference, however, is that MMOs may instead of games be seen as worlds as game researcher Lisbeth Klastrup (2004) asserts. In these worlds, the player immerses himself/herself in a game world with thousands of other players. How players live and inhabit these virtual worlds has been a fertile soil for academic investigations concerning the social dimensions and aspects. The first academic studies on computer mediated communication (CMC) and socialization were primarily concerned with “social behavior and misbehavior in online communities, gender bending and questions related to the identities of the user” (Karlsen, 2009:6) and were focusing on analyzing the interrelation between people and technology instead of the gaming aspects.

As MMOs, i.e. EverQuest and World of Warcraft, have gained a more commercial status, the population of virtual inhabitants in these worlds has increased to several millions. The mainstream media has focused on these games’ addiction aspects, whereas game researchers have diligently stressed the necessity to include the social aspects as a central component in studies of games (e.g. Taylor 2003, 2006, Karlsen 2009, Mortensen 2003). Karlsen (2009:9) states that analyses and studies on gaming without reference to the social

² “Homo Ludens” can be translated into “(the) playing human”.

aspects and dimensions, “might severely limit the understanding of the game”. He follows up this warning by emphasizing the need for researchers to also understand how a game’s mechanics influence gameplay and the need to map out the basic structures on which a game is built. In summary, to fully comprehend a game, the researcher must have a dual perspective of the game they are studying. This comprehension can be gained by both understanding how the game works with regards to game mechanics as well as social components. Many studies focus solely on one of these aspects, whereas other studies apply this dual perspective in their analysis of a game but tend to have their main focus on either one of them. (Karlsen 2009:9-10) There is an even bigger lack of studies which analyzes how these two aspects influence each other and how they are equally important. In my thesis, I will try to encapture both these perspectives by looking in detail at how game mechanics can merge together with the social aspects to affect gameplay.

Although research on MMOGs and social structures in virtual communities has substantially increased in the last five years (2003, 2006, Yee 2003 – 2009, Ducheneaut 2001 – 2008 etc), studies on social hierarchies within online social games such as World of Warcraft and how social norms can shape the playing experience for player together with the rules, function and world that are already embedded by the developer are scarce. Many articles touch upon the subject of a guild’s structure and their ranks and hierarchy, but few studies give a thorough analysis of this theme.

Overall, my thesis focuses on how hierarchies emerge, create and separate different categories of players with regards to social status gained in the game. These hierarchies are probably less obvious to spot, especially for the more casual gamer. I will in this thesis investigate whether they are there as gameplay factors shaping how players play (or even are forced) to play the game. The problem is that these hierarchies cannot easily be identified as there are no textual ranks or in-game visuals to confirm them in the same way as i.e. guild ranks. The relevance of social status, and how it affects or even limits a player’s access to gameplay and game content appears, however, as more distinct if you are a member of a high-end guild i.e. a hardcore player. Studies conducted from this angle of playing and experiencing the game are scarce, as it requires the researcher not only to

immerse themselves in the game, but an immense investment of time and effort. I.e. a high-end raiding guild will expect you to actively play four hours five to seven days a week. My concluding argument will therefore be based on empirical data collected within a period of four years collected through the scientific method of virtual ethnography. As I already was a member and an officer of a high-end raiding guild before starting this thesis, I have had the privilege to investigate aspects and a dimension of the game which are inaccessible to most researchers.

Categories (suggestions) on different player types have already been introduced in the theory of computer games. Most imminent are Bartle's taxonomy with his four categories of players; Explorer, socializer, killer and achiever, but also relevant to this thesis are Taylor's categorization of casual and power-gamers. I have chosen to view these two categorizations as not as black and white by adding different categories between them since some players are very hard to categorize. In my thesis, I will utilize categories presented in former research in a slightly different manner than just applying them to players based on their way of playing the game; I will see if they also correlate to ranks or places in social hierarchies. I will give a thorough discussion of whether different categories of players fit into the social hierarchy based on questionnaires sent to WoW players of different play styles. My thesis will be based on interactions with hundreds of players over a period of four years. Although this might sound like a large number, it is relatively small considering the fact that over eleven million people regularly play WoW, but because I have picked out players with all kind of play styles, it will hopefully give a representative answer to whether my research questions can be supported.

The article that focuses most on hierarchies in World of Warcraft is Dmitri Williams et al.'s "From Tree House to Barracks". (Williams et al., 2006) The goal of the article is to map out the social dynamics of a guild. Focus is brought upon player behavior, attitudes and opinions to explore the meanings they make, the social capital they hold and the networks they form. To explore the abovementioned areas in breadth and depth, the authors have used a representative sample and in-depth interviews. The theory of the article is based on "political science, organizational communication and sociology, with the added complication

of being undertaken in a virtual space influenced by artificial computer code” (Williams et al 2006). It is noteworthy that this is a slightly different approach to the subject of game study. Williams et al. bring completely different research areas on the table. Williams et al. go as far as stating that “in the broadest sense the questions of the article deal with civic life in North America” even if they are “merely” studying lives of players within a computer game.

The article also studies how different guilds with different focuses in the game create hierarchies within the guild that can either be very strict, or very loose and informal all depending on what kind of guild it is. They argue that social guilds made out of friends will have an almost flat hierarchy where everyone is equal, as opposed to high-end guilds whose aim is to beat the hardest dungeons and encounters in a game requires a defined hierarchy with leaders and subordination. My research will in more detail try to explain the relations between the different players with different positions in the guild, but I will also focus on hierarchies among players and guilds on a server; How do players from differently structured guilds, with different aims relate to each other? Is a hierarchy created that puts “powergamers” (Taylor 2006) at the top and social/casual players at the bottom? My thesis has mainly been inspired by the research of T.L. Taylor, a sociologist and game researcher at the IT University of Copenhagen. In her article “The Sopranos meet Everquest” (2003), she and Jakobsson argue that social interaction is a component of gameplay and also the ultimate exploit of the game. They draw lines between the MMOG Everquest and the show The Sopranos which plot revolves around rival mafia families. Taylor argues that social interaction in Everquest is based on relationships of trust, just like the relationships between mafia members. Your status and success in the game depend not only on your own skills and perseverance, but also on your relationships with other players. A player who has a vast network of friends and players will progress through the game faster than a player who knows no one or very few people.

In her book “Play between Worlds”, based on years of play in the Everquest universe, Taylor (2006) takes her research from the abovementioned article even further with a thorough study of players’ relations within the game world and the offline world. In the book, there is a recollection of face-to-face meetings Taylor has had with the people she has played with in

the game. One of her main objectives is to break down the old stereotypical view that players who spend most of their free time in the game are anti-social creatures.

While Taylor and Jakobssen (2003) argue that social networks inherited by the players is the most crucial factor to achieving whatever goals you set in the game, Ducheneaut et al. bring forth the aspect of belonging to a highly structured guild as a major factor for players who want to see the high-end encounters of the game. (Ducheneaut et al. 2006) I will draw on these theories to see to what extent belonging to a highly structured guild also affects your social relations as described in Taylor and Jakobssens article, and vice versa: To what extent are social relations a key factor motivationally for players who want to get into high-end guilds? It is important to note that these two articles have used different methods for studying the game. Taylor and Jakobssen approach the subject ethnographically by playing the game whereas Williams and Ducheneaut et al. use hard data collected from bots in the game as their main method of research.

To understand social interaction and social status in World of Warcraft Chen et. (2007) has presented the “self-other dynamics” in their article “Understanding Social Interaction in World of Warcraft”. I will use these dynamics of social interaction, to analyze how World of Warcraft players view themselves as well as other players, and how social status works as a component of gameplay.

1.2 Research question

What immediately caught my interest as I joined my first guild at the maximum level was not just how the social aspects of the game immersed me in the game because it was fun to play with other people, but also because I often kept playing because I felt obliged to. Later, when I held a high rank in the best guild on the server, it also became apparent that a big goal in the game was also to climb the in the social hierarchy or just to keep my current position. If I would have played the game exactly as I wanted to; ignoring all social norms existing within the game world and my guild, I would rapidly fall in this social hierarchy,

making my experience in the game poorer as no one would want to play with me. The social aspects, and how they together with game mechanics, create virtual social status and hierarchies among players inside the game are the focus of this thesis. I have divided this topic into several research questions investigated throughout my thesis:

1. How do social hierarchies and status work as components of the game? Is this component more present and influencing for hardcore players and does it affect all types of players in the same way?
2. What are the negative and positive effects of such a component in gameplay? How does more traditional gameplay elements such as loot influence social hierarchies and vice versa?
3. To what extent is social status a motivation factor for players of WoW? Are social hierarchies a gameplay component that is working as a two-edged sword and what would in that case be the reasons for this?

In the virtual worlds of MMORPGs, players have the option to interact with thousands of other players and build friendships/relations that in some cases may last for years. Building relations and bonds with other players are usually a necessity in MMOs, due to the fact that many parts of the game cannot be tackled alone. Some game content even requires you to join up with up to forty other players in order to succeed. To more easily manage ones relations and companions most MMORPGs offer the mechanic of joining (or creating) a guild. Some form and join guilds in order to more easily communicate and play with family and/or IRL friends, while other guilds main focus is to overcome the hardest content of the game that requires a pool of people who actively can play for hours each day. Point is however that regardless of how you play the game, you will form relations with other players. Some of these relations might be valuable in the way that you can chat with people and make friends; other relations might be valuable because they will help your character beat hard content and therefore get better equipment. One of the objectives of this thesis is to look at the social structures between these many ways of playing the game. I have also studied how players in high-end guilds view for example players who play mainly to socialize with their friends, and to what extent players who are part of a guild which can beat hard

content see themselves as more superior to casual players. Is the main goal for many players not to clear all content and get best attainable gear, but also climb in the social hierarchy that exists within the game, and why would this be appealing? To what extent is this in-game hierarchy imposed on players, making them feel superior or inferior to other players depending on how they play the game?

2. A Brief Outline of the Evolution of Multi User Online Games

2.1 From MUDs to World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft is a Massive Multi Player Role-playing Game (MMORPG) developed by American Blizzard interactive. The definition of an MMORPG is a game where a large number of players interact with one each another in a virtual world. (Wikipedia). The term itself was first used by Richard Garriot, the creator of Ultima Online; one of the first graphical MMORPGs.

It is a commonly accepted fact that MMORPGs derive from Multi-User Dungeons (I.E. Mortensen 2003) more commonly known as MUDs. MUDs are in comparison to MMORPGs completely based on text with no graphical interface other than at most representation of figures made up by letters/characters and different colors. The first MUD was introduced in 1978 under the name of MUD1³ and was written by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle. The best way to describe a MUD is a world where the world is projected to the player as text and

³ MUD1 was actually just called MUD but is later referred to as MUD1 to distinguish it from its successor MUD2. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MUD1>)

the user/player can navigate in this textual space by typing in commands. The MUDs could and can be seen as Dungeon & Dragons first virtual manifestation as many of the rules that were to be implemented in MUDs after 1978 were based on the outcome of virtual dice the same way the tabletop Dungeons & Dragons games are played out with pen, paper, rulebooks and dices.

World of Warcraft is not only today's most popular MMORPG with over 11 million subscribers (Wauters, 2008) all around the globe, but also the most economically successful game in videogame history as listed in Guinness World Records (2009). An explanation to World of Warcrafts success will be a returning topic throughout this thesis, but one main factor is that it is so accessible to pick up and play even for those who could not play for hours each day. (Reimer 2006) MMORPGs like Runescape (2001, 2004) and Anarchy Online (2001) had and have a significantly smaller player base, and this might be blamed on that they are more complex and less accessible to the casual gamer who has no affiliation to MUDs, D&D or similarly based games. To take a leap from relatively simple games, with regards to gameplay, like Super Mario (1985 – 2007), Halo (2001-2008) or Metal Gear Solid (1998 – 2008) to a game like Ultima Online will probably be a huge problem if the player is not devoted enough to learn the complex interface and design, and how to navigate a virtual character whose abilities are based on mathematical statistics through a game with no real goal or ending.

Upon release, World of Warcraft received high review scores in all the big gaming magazines and websites, and its colorful and vibrant graphics which were more reminiscent of a cartoon, than an attempt at realism, attracted people who had never touched an MMORPG or MUD before. The game was not only graphically appealing and fun to play; but it was also easy to pick up and play for the inexperienced gamer. Another reason why so many started playing World of Warcraft, as observed by Ducheneaut et al. (2006), may have been that the Warcraft world, story and many of the characters were already familiar to many gamers through the Real Time Strategy series Warcraft. Blizzard Entertainment took something players already knew and transferred it to another genre. This might have attracted a lot of

gamers who were already fans of the Warcraft universe as well as the overall quality of all Blizzard games. The RTS series Warcraft could also be played online with other players throughout the world but in a much lesser scale than World of Warcraft; Where you could at maximum play with 5 other players at the same time in the Warcraft series, players are in World of Warcraft able of joining servers that each can hold about 20.000 other players. (Ducheneaut et al 2006).

2.2 World of Warcraft is born

World of Warcraft was released 23rd of November 2004 after 5 years in the making and became the world's most played MMORPG in record time. On January 16, 2007, the first expansion, The Burning Crusade was released. The game had by this time become so popular that some people were sleeping in lines outside the stores to secure themselves a copy. The game also became the best-selling game of 2007 in North America and Europe and also the fastest-selling game, with its 2.4 million copies sold in the first 24 hours and 3.5 million in the first month. (Gamasutra) In fall 2008, the second expansion, Wrath of the Lich king was released. The Warcraft universe and its lore, was however not exclusive for World of Warcraft, but is as mentioned above, actually carried over from Blizzard's Real time Strategy series simply called Warcraft. This series featured three main titles and two expansions. The majority of main characters (typically encountered as NPCs in quests) and its story in World of Warcraft are taken from these three games. People, who have played the three RTS games will recognize characters and locations found in World of Warcraft. The main villain in Warcraft 3, Arthas, will for example be the last boss encounter in the latest expansion, Wrath of the Lich King. This might be a key to World of Warcraft initial success, that players recognized the locations, characters and lore, and therefore felt less alienated in such a daunting huge world which often can be overwhelming if one starts an MMORPG. They are as the name suggests massive.

In World of Warcraft the player takes control of a character (or avatar), and emerges themselves in an ever-expanding world with no ending. The player will throughout the

game, develop their character by level, armor, weapons and social capital. The goals of the game vary from player to player. (Bartle 1996, Taylor 2003) On their journey of improving their character, most players will find themselves grouping up with other players to enter dungeons and completing quests that cannot be tackled alone. By beating these dungeons and quests, the players will usually be rewarded with better weapons or armor than those available through “soloing”. Some groups can result in fierce discussions over “loot”, while other groups can lead to more grouping at a different point in the game.

3. The Game Mechanics

For the reader to better understand the game and what I will talking about later in my study, I will in this chapter descriptively present some fundamental gameplay mechanics and features in World of Warcraft.

3.1 Playing the Game

World of Warcraft is an MMORPG, which means that you are supposed to play the game together with other people through the internet. However, a huge part of the game is played solo in the start of the game where a huge amount of leveling is involved. During this first stage of the game the player has very little to none interaction with other players. In this stage the player will see a lot of other players roaming around the world, but in most cases, players tend to mind their own business if they do not need help i.e. to complete a quest. Occasionally, some greetings or emotes can be exchanged.

3.2 The World

World of Warcraft is in its current state with the TBC expansion, played out in two different worlds: Azeroth (figure1) and The Outlands. Azeroth reminds most of high fantasy based on the medieval time era with some exceptions of technology, while The Outlands, introduced in the second expansion The Burning Crusade (TBC), featured a style inspired by science-fiction with aliens, mechanical structures, alien vegetation and skies filled with meteors and stars. Some players did not like this new take on

the Warcraft universe⁴, and were pleased when Blizzard released the third expansion, Wrath of the Lich King (WotLK). This expansion introduced a new continent in the midst of Azeroth called Northrend, where the style of the game went back to more classical fantasy as found in the original game pre-TBC.



Figure 1 Map over Azeroth.

⁴ The graphical design of The Burning Crusade has been eagerly discussed on the official forums of the game. <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html;jsessionId=9916E0788E7DD888390557E3C6CC690B?topicId=4311203983&sid=1>

3.3 Creating a character

Before you can start to explore World of Warcraft, you will have to create your character and choose a name for it. Creating a character is something players usually spend great time on, as they will be stuck with for countless hours. (Hagström 2008). It is typical for players to create more than one character, although most players have one character they put most time and effort into. This character is usually referred to as a “main”, while characters they do not play that much are referred to as “alts” which is short for “alternatives”. Alts are usually created to try out a different class than what their main is.

World of Warcraft offers a highly customizable character creator editor (Figure 2). Here you can choose between ten different races; human, dwarf, night elf, draenei, orc, undead, tauren, troll and blood elf. The introduction of the draenei and blood elf in The Burning Crusade expansion and was one of the expansions biggest magnet to gain new subscribers as well as keep the existing ones. All of the different races differ somewhat from each other gameplay wise; night elves for example get one percent more chance to dodge attacks, while dwarves for example got an ability called stoneform that can make them immune to poison. The race you choose also determines your starting point in the game. These starting points can also be seen as the home worlds of the different classes. Each of the ten races has their unique areas with their own lore and history. As with most other MMORPGs the player can in WoW, alter the physical traits of their character such as gender, hairstyle, hair color, facial hair, skin tone etc.

After you have chosen your race, you will have to choose your class. What class you choose is the most important decision you take in the character creation process, as it impacts the way you play the game. WoW offers 10 different classes: druid, mage, shaman, paladin, priest, warrior, warlock and rogue. In the latest expansion, WotLK, the new deathknight class was introduced. The class of your character decides what kind of spells and abilities he or she will be able to master. A warrior, for example will only use melee oriented attacks, and will in most cases be up and personal with other enemy players and creatures, while a mage

on the contrary will most often always keep a distance since he will be casting spells. In WoW you are not forced into a specific role. E.g. a player of the priest class may switch between being a damage dealer or a healer by reallocating their points in their talent trees. If you are in a guild or a group, however, a player might be expected to fill a specific role.



Figure 2: Character creation screen

Each class in the game has a unique designated 'talent tree'. Every time a player's character gains a level in the game, he or she will be awarded one talent point which they can freely put into the talent tree. The talent tree holds several different skills the player can unlock for use in the game by spending talent points on them. Not all skills in the talent tree are available at once, since the player has to progress to a certain level for talent skills to be unlocked. All of the different classes have a talent tree divided into three different branches. Players usually allocate most of their points in one of these three branches depending on their play style. For example the priest mentioned above, would have to re-allocate most of his talent points in one particular branch to heal the most effectively, whereas if he wanted to deal the most damage, he would have to spend his talent points in

another branch oriented towards damage dealing. The combination the player spends their talent points in the talent tree are usually referred to as their “spec” or how they are “spec’ed” (short for specialization). The way you are “spec’ed”, can have huge impact on your gameplay in an MMORPG, for example if a group were going inside a difficult dungeon and they needed a healer, they would most likely not pick a healer who did not have talent points deep in the healing branch of the talent tree.



Figure 3 The warrior talent tree. One branch is designed for PvP (Arms), one for PvE damage dealing(Fury) and one for PvE tanking (Protection).

3.4 Questing

After having created your character, a short intro will be presented. You will then be given control of your character. Your character is now almost naked with only a few scraps of equipment and only a few basic skills in your action bar. The action bar is part of the game’s

graphical user interface (GUI). In the GUI, important information like health, mana and your skills are displayed. At the bottom of your screen in the GUI an “experience bar” is displayed. This bar fills up each time you gain experience points. These points can be awarded from killing creatures (or more commonly referred to as mobs) or completing quests.

In the beginning of the game, before you reach the maximum level with your character (which is 80 in the moment of writing), a huge part of World of Warcraft revolves around questing. Quests in World of Warcraft has a very clear syntax (Rettberg 2008:268), and can best be summarized as a three step procedure the player has to go through: The first step is that the player has to pick up the quest from an NPC (non-playable character) or sometimes even an item. NPCs and items who give out quests are easily spotted as a huge yellow exclamation marks hover above them. The player then talks to this NPC, which will give you a quest (or even multiple) which the player has to complete. The second step is that the player has to complete the quest objective(s) in the accepted quest. Quests objectives are usually tasks such a killing a certain amount of mobs, picking up a certain of items or talking to another NPC. The player has a quest journal easily accessible in the GUI, which he or she can access at any time to check the progress of their quests, when the quest is completed it will say so next to the quest in the journal, and the player can return to the NPC who gave them the quest. The exclamation mark above the NPCs head will now have turned into a question mark as the quest’s objective are met. The final and third step is for the player to turn in the quest. The player is then awarded with XP, money, and often a reward in form of a new piece of equipment. Some quests even lead to follow-up quests, which are commonly referred to by players as chain quests. A long chain quest will often award the player with a particularly good item or a key which is needed to unlock certain dungeons.



Figure 4 An available quest easily as indicated by the NPC's exclamation mark over his head.



Figure 5 A quest's objectives have been completed indicated by a question mark over the NPC's head.

Questing is an exceptional good way for the player to maintain his or her interest in the game while leveling. As a player myself, I am familiar with the drive to do quests to get better equipment and unlock new content. Sometimes when you complete certain quests, new quests become available. From these new quests, you can be awarded even better equipment than from the previous quests, which will keep you playing. One also wants to gain new levels, since the ultimate objective while leveling is to reach the maximum level.

For many players, the leveling is just a tedious part of the game that is obligatory before you reach the max level and the best gear in the game become available together with the hardest dungeons. Doing quests is much faster, entertaining and more rewarding in terms of items and XP, than just killing random mobs. It can be argued whether questing is the fastest way to level. Some people “powerlevel” to the highest level, and they achieve that by killing certain mobs in certain zones which are easy to kill, but at the same time give lots of XP. Killing the same type of mobs repeatedly is referred to as “grinding” by WoW players.

3.5 PvP – Player versus Player

PvP or Player-versus-Player is the definition of play where players fight other players instead of computer controlled creatures. In World of Warcraft, PvP has become a very popular endeavor since it has different platforms for players to immerse themselves in the game. The four distinct PvP platforms are:

- Battlegrounds (PvP on a large scale, where 10-40 players from both factions meet each other in what can be described as mini-games. The mini-games have pretty basic rule sets like capturing the opposing team’s flag and bring it back to the team’s base in order to win.
- Arena (Before you can play the arena, you will have to start a team or join one. There are three different subcategories (2v2, 3v3, 5v5) of arena you can play depending on how big your arena team is. You can meet teams from both factions when you play the arena. The arena teams you can meet are picked randomly out from a larger set of servers called “battlegroups”).
- Duels (Two players duel each other. The one who gets the other player down to 1 HP first wins). It is an unwritten rule during duels that you cannot use potions or buffs from other player’s classes.
- World PvP (This kind of PvP is referring to battles or fights that are finding place in random zones of the world. For example if a player is running around questing and another player from the opposing faction attacks him it is called World PvP. Raids

formed to attack the other faction cities also fall under this term. Some players also set out a goal to find players from the other faction and kill them, often reconnoitering places where they know a lot of players will be. The kind of player who actively does this fall under the category of “killer”; one of the four categories of players in Bartle’s (1996) taxonomy.)

3.6 Factions

What race you pick in the character creation will decide what faction you belong to. In World of Warcraft there are two different factions, The Alliance and The Horde. Humans, Night elves, dwarves, gnomes and the draenei are members of The Alliance while the rest of the races belong to the Horde. Alliance and Horde players are made enemies by the meta-mechanics of the game. Members of opposing factions cannot communicate with each other through the in-game chat; neither can they be in the same group, raid or guild. The two factions also have different towns and cities throughout the game world. If a player tries to enter a city or town of the faction of which he does not belong, he or she will be attacked by faction NPC guards and most certainly experience the death of his character.

3.7 Grouping

Even if you can team up with other players already from the start of the game, you typically do not before around level 20. At approximately that level you get the first quests that require you to cooperate with others to complete them. A player can level all the way to max without interacting with any other players, but by not socializing with others, you would miss out on good equipment or “gear” as it is called by players in WoW, not to speak of relations or even friendships with other people.

When a player enters a group or party, the other party members' portraits together with health and mana bars (or rage/energy/runic power if they are warriors, rogues or death knights) will appear on the player's screen. The players in the party will also get a chat dedicated to the party. When players are in a party, they will share all XP, money and loot when killing monsters. If an especially good item drops (usually from a boss in an instance), a dialogue with a dice and a cross button will appear on all of the party members' screens. If they click the dice button, they will roll for the item, and if they roll the highest they win it. If they click on the cross, they will pass on the item. The person who invites the other players to the group is made the leader of the group, which gives him or her rights to kick party members and set the loot system. There is also an unwritten law in the game that most players tend to follow; the party leader makes decisions for the group. For example, if the party enters a dungeon, the party leader will tell the others in the group in what order to kill mobs, or what way they are going. A group can only hold five members.

To find a group, a player can either ask people he knows in the game, or he can use an inbuilt match making mechanism that finds other players who are looking for the same dungeon. The match making search engine will then attempt to create an optimal group (Usually a tank, a healer, and three damage dealers). Another option to find a group is to use the LFG (Looking For Group) or general chat channel which everyone in the same zone as you can read. Sometimes you can get a great group with some players you might even add to your friends list, other times you can end up with players who will make the group wipe (the term 'wipe' is commonly used in WoW when everyone in a group or party is dead) for hours. The best option is undeniably to join a guild.

3.8 Guilds

At any time in the game, a player can either join or start a guild. Most people however prefer to join an already established guild. The perk with joining a guild is that the player gets a sense of belonging, as the name of their guild will read over their characters head, as well as guild tabard they can purchase for their character, with a unique design for each guild. The

player will also gain access to a guild chat, which only the guilds players can read and write in. Guilds in WoW have a basic hierarchical structure as T.L. Taylor also describes EverQuest guilds have (2003) with a guildmaster, officers, and normal members. The hierarchic ranks in the guild can also be customized by the guildmaster. For example if the guildmaster wants people who are on trial to join the guild, he can create separate rank for trials. He can also configure what kind of rights the different ranks have. The most important ranks are the rights to kick or invite members. These rights are usually reserved for the guildmaster and the officers in the guild.

3.9 Raids

When more than 5 people group together, the group will be formed into a raid. A raid can hold up to 40 players. A raid will have one raid leader, but opposed to in a party, the raid leader can also promote other players to become raid leader assistants, also giving them rights to invite and kick other people from the raid. Players rarely join a raid group before they hit max level. Most raids are also carried out by guilds. But occasionally, from my experience, players who don't know each other also form raids (usually by promoting the raid in one of the general chat channels). These PUG (Pick-up group) raids usually raid cities of the opposing faction, or easy raid dungeons.

3.10 The achievement system

The achievement system was implemented in the game with the release of the third expansion, WotLK, and features in the writing moment over 900 achievements the player can unlock. The goals of these achievements vary from "the purely whimsical to the truly epic" (Official WoW homepage), and covers every gameplay aspect. To unlock some of these achievements you need i.e. to explore zones and areas of the game, complete specific quests or number of quests etc. Many of the achievements can be seen as pointless (Like doing the /kiss emote to all the critters in the game), whereas others require the player to beat the

hardest content of the game in order to be unlocked. A select few of the achievements reward the player with titles (shown to other players over the character together with the player's name), tabard or in-game pets. These rewards are by Blizzard stated as "purely cosmetic" (WoW official site), but as I will later illustrate, they do in fact have an impact on gameplay and the social aspects of the game.



Figure 5 Whenever an achievement is unlocked the game informs you of this as illustrated in this picture. Unlocking achievements are also broadcasted to your guild and the closest players in the proximity.

4. Methodological Framework

No method(s) has/have been formalized and recognized as the best way to study a game. The reason for this is that it can be argued that game studies is not a discipline but a field. To study a game, however, Lars Konzack, a game researcher from Denmark, has presented a method where one breaks down the game into seven different layers; Hardware, program code, functionality, gameplay, meaning, referentiality and socio-culture. (2002) Konzack argues that one can only analyze a game completely by approaching it analytically from all angles. Konzack illustrates his own method by applying it to the analysis of the fighting game Soul Calibur and later on the MMO Everquest. (Konzack, 2004) Aarseth (2003) fends of this argument and recommends that when studying a game it can be difficult or next to impossible for one person to only focus on all of these layers and even tedious(for game analysts the hardware layer is mostly irrelevant), and the best strategy is to focus on two to three layers. In my thesis, the layer of socio-culture will be in focus, and linked with that of the gameplay and functionality layers since the three layers often influence each other. A player can for example widen his social circle within the game to be able to see specific content. To be able to see for example the hardest boss fights and raid instances in the game – a prerequisite is that you belong to a high-end guild.

4.1 Virtual ethnography

The primary method used to investigate the research questions in this thesis has been through a virtual ethnography or in other words by actively playing the game myself.

Ethnography is a way of seeing through the participants eyes: a grounded approach that aims for a deep understanding of the cultural foundations of the group (Hine 2000).

Ethnographies are most commonly carried out by researchers through the practice of living or spending an extensive amount of time with the society or cultural group in focus of the research. Ethnography was a method of research that was primarily used in the field of social-anthropology, but as communities now emerge through social interaction on the internet, it has become an alternative to understanding how technology and sociality influences each other. It is pivotal through an ethnography that the researcher not only lives with the society as an observer, but actively interacts with it to get a better understanding of the societal culture. Ethnography has received a lot of criticism from other “harder” sciences due to its lack of formal framework to judge the validity of its results. Unlike research tools such as questionnaires, surveys etc., ethnography does not have “a full armoury of evaluative techniques” (Hine 2000:41). Some of the criticism towards ethnography and virtual ethnography in particular, will be discussed below. Despite the criticism ethnography is still a popular method in the social sciences as well as other areas of research due to its ability to provide large amounts of rich and detailed information which makes it possible for the researcher to get thorough insight into the complexity and depth of the subject of study. Another favorable ability of ethnography is its lack of dependence on a priori hypotheses. As Hine argues, “quantitative studies are deemed thin representations of isolated concepts imposed on the study by the researcher” (2000:42). Instead the researcher presents information as a result of a natural development of the subject(s) of study, rather than simply confirming or rejecting his/her a priori assumptions.

Virtual ethnography can be seen as its own category derived from the ethnography we know from the social sciences. In virtual ethnography, the researcher aims to study a virtual community or a society on the internet by not only observing how participants act, but also

understanding the actions. This is done through using CMC (Computer mediated communication):

A general term referring to a range of different ways in which people can communicate with one another via computer network. Includes both synchronous and asynchronous communication, one-to-one and many-to-many interactions and text-based or video and audio communication (Hine 2000).

Conducting a virtual ethnography gives the researcher a holistic view of the system or the community in question. An enormous MMO such as World of Warcraft cannot be understood by separating the different components of which the game consists. This is especially true when it comes to socialism and social interaction since these are often factors which emerge from game mechanics. Game mechanics and social interaction in an MMO are inseparable when conducting a research on virtual hierarchies; for example to start a guild, a player must first get nine other players to sign a charter. Playing an MMO with no players to interact with would render most of the games' mechanics useless or abundant.

Finding solid empirical data can be a time-consuming practice especially when it comes to an area such as sociality in an MMO since there are literally millions of players each with their own opinions and views of how and why they play the game. These views and opinions may change over time as the game evolves or is updated. One example is the update in World of Warcraft which implemented PvP arenas to the game. Many players would forfeit their rank and position in their old raiding guild to join smaller guilds which solely concentrate on playing arena PvP as the reward in forms of items and equipment were equal to those you could get from raiding a dungeon with 40 or 25 man, even if you only need 1-4 other players to create an arena team. What we can see from this example is that some people who could raid 5 days a week for 5 hours each day with 39 other people would suddenly change their in-game "lifestyle" drastically when it come to sociality – from interacting with 24 other people every day for hours, the number of people would be reduced to only about 10 (Even if the max arena team size is 5, many arena teams would have extras that could fill the spots if one team member was offline or they needed a special combination of classes etc.) If you interviewed a person who played World of Warcraft 2 years ago when he was raiding every

day for 5 hours, and then interviewed him today, still playing the same amount of hours by participating in the arena, the interview would produce completely different data. The game would have evolved, leading the player to change not only the way he played the game, but also sociality within the game universe as per say how many people he interacted with. So when it comes to research on online games and sociality, not all data you recover from research is everlasting or printed in stone.

As there are so many players and so many different ways to play an MMORPG such as World of Warcraft it is impossible to categorize everything in detail by oneself. However, it can also be dangerous to rely blindly on what others have written, since prejudice or other factors can produce a faulty picture of the medium. By this I am referring to the countless newspaper articles written about World of Warcraft in newspapers and digital publications often related to addiction and anti-social behavior as a direct result of playing the game. (Compare i.e. Aftenposten 2009, NRK 2007, Ars Technica 2006). Some of these articles are based on personal experience, others are based on hypotheses by respected doctors or psychologists who have barely even seen or played the game but have written articles based on patients with extreme causes of addiction or side effects from playing the game for too long. In the moment of writing I have played World of Warcraft extensively for over 3 years on almost all levels; from casual to hardcore. As a result of all this time played I will later present the most prominent levels or styles in which the game is played.

One may ask why I did not base my analysis on data already extruded by other recognized game researchers such as Taylor(2003 – 2008) or Mortensen (2003 - 2008) who have invested countless hours in the Everquest (Sony) and World of Warcraft universe. The reason for this is directly linked to my research focus on virtual hierarchies between players and how I needed to not only see how the game functioned and how other people played it, but I also needed to see the relation between e.g. casual and hardcore players. The book Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft (Corneliussen 2008) is perhaps the most profound work written on World of Warcraft, and has also been one of the main reference points for this master thesis, but as the description says it is mainly “exploring *World of Warcraft* as both cultural phenomenon and game” (MIT press 2008) and focuses very little

on the intricate hierarchies which often can be seen by players as the glue that keeps successful guilds functional over years. By successful, I am referring to guilds which are raiding difficult instances and boss mobs which in turn are parts of content that casual players never will see because it requires not only an incredible amount of time, but also skill in playing the game since this is a necessity for a hardcore guild to accept you.

For me to investigate my research questions, it was necessary for me to join the ranks of “hardcore” players who also thought of me as a player who was there for the game and not for data. This is where ethics also became a factor in my research; whether I should tell them that they were partaking in a research program and perhaps risk receiving constructed behavior, or just play “undercover” and write down anything that I might think would become useful in my thesis.

In addition to the strengths addressed above, there are also several weaknesses connected to this method. One of the most prominent criticisms towards the use of virtual ethnography has been the lack of objectivity of the researcher. In virtual ethnography, the researcher takes on an active role in the actual gaming process and thus loses his/her extrospective view of the players he/she wants to observe. The active role of the researcher him/herself may also lead to researcher bias; however, it is important to distinguish between bias and subjectivity. “Subjectivity is an integral part of your way of thinking that is conditioned by your educational background, discipline, philosophy, experience and skills. Bias, on the other hand, is a deliberate attempt to either conceal or highlight something” (Kumar 2005:6). Thus subjectivity can be seen as a resource rather than limitation. This is also expressed through the principles of virtual ethnography as summarized by Hine (2000:63-65). Hine argues that virtual ethnography “is necessary partial” and that “the ethnographer’s engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight” (Hine 2000:65). She explains this by arguing that “this kind of engagement adds a new dimension to the exploration of the use of the medium in context” and concludes that “virtual ethnography can usefully draw on ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension” (Hine 2000:65).

4.2 Questionnaires and surveys

I have chosen to gather some data from surveys, but I did not send them out before I had formed some questions based on my own playing of the game; occasionally I registered something that I suspected being common or uncommon about the players, and I would try to answer it statistically by issuing digital questionnaires on guild and realm forums. By promising anonymity to the participants, I tried to reduce the probability of getting false data. I also performed quality control on all of the received questionnaires by going through each of them and check if anyone had answered the questionnaire with clearly false answers. 46 players participated in the survey. This may seem as a small number judging by the fact that World of Warcraft has almost 12 million subscribers.

4.3 In-depth interviews

I have chosen to include depth interviews as one of the methods to investigate my thesis. The reason for this is that after playing for a while, some questions that arose were too complex to ask in a survey. At times, the “why-questions” were just overwhelming. Questions like why a person would go to a dungeon for 4 months, although he was bored of it after one, at which he would answer that he did it for the guild. This lead to another set of why questions. Almost all of the interviews were carried out either through the game using the in-game messaging system, or through a voice program called Ventrilo⁵ due to the fact that most of the people I interviewed were situated in different countries. I was, however, able to arrange for two physical meetings. These interviews were conducted in Norwegian and later translated into English.

⁵ Ventrilo is a Voice over IP program by Flagship Industries, Inc
www.ventrilo.com

4.4 Informants

The following is brief presentation of my informants:

Duke

Duke is a 22 years old single student living in Belgium. He holds the position of officer and raid leader in a high-end raiding guild which is currently amongst the top ten guilds in the world. He played the hunter class for 2 years, but rerolled a warrior because the guild needed warriors. He has played since the release of WoW, and was an active player of the first-person shooter game Counter-Strike before he started playing WoW. Wow is his first MMO. The average playing time for Duke is 5 – 10 hours every day.

Lilamy

Lilamy is a 23 year old single female from Denmark. She is unemployed due to a chronic disease. She holds the position of member in a high-end raiding guild and plays a priest. Lilamy has previously played different PC role-playing games but no MMOs. The average playing time for her is 2-9 hours every day.

Rush

Rush is a 25 year old single immigrant from Bosnia-Herzegovina, currently living in Sweden. He works with development of mobile devices. He is a raid leader and officer in a high-end raiding guild being the number one guild in progress on its server. The average playing time for Rush on a daily basis is 5-7 hours.

Seraphim

Seraphim is a 25 year old single Norwegian theology student. He is officer in a high-end raiding guild. WoW is Seraphim's first MMO, but he has previously played single and multi-player games. The average playing time each day is 3-6 hours.

Darkeagle

Darkeagle is a 17 year old single college student from England. He plays a hunter in the same guild as Duke. He has never previously played an MMO before but used to play Counter-Strike together with other FPS games. The average playing time each is 6-10 hours.

Lance

Lance is a 30 year old male US citizen who has in the last 6 years been living in Germany due to work. He is married with two children. Lance is a warrior in a high-end raiding guild. He used to play the MMO Asheron's Call before he switched to WoW. The average playing time each day is 2-6 hours.

Soprano

Soprano is a 25 year old single student of Geology in Italy. He used to be a member of a high-end raiding guild but quit WoW one year ago. WoW is his first MMO, but he has previously been playing other genres of games. The average playing time each day when he used to play: 6-10 hours.

4.5 Information gathering

Some of the data on which I will base my discussion on will be extracted from internet sites such as forums, blogs, guild homepages etc. In this thesis, I have also included a few quotes and posts from private forums linked to the guilds I was in as well as some posts from the official forums. The reason from including other media like boards and internet sites are

because they are as Karlsen (2009) states interconnected with the game. The official site is for example the developers' communication channel where upcoming changes or updates are shared with the players. The official forums are also the most common channel for players to either complain about mechanics in the game or share information with other players.

4.6 Observation

Shortly after starting the work on this thesis I spent much time observing players. Through the observation I explored how, why and when they socially interacted with other players as well as how game mechanics influenced the interaction. These observations were primarily conducted in instances/dungeons (party and raid) as well as in the biggest cities in the game which works as a natural meeting points for people to chat, buy reagents, crafting items etc. Observing the virtual world and its inhabitants and how they lived their virtual life was a prerequisite for me to get an understanding of how players viewed themselves as well as other players with regards to social status. Observing other players were also necessary to understand the self-other dynamics of social interaction presented by Chen et al. (2007).

5. “Growing up” – An Allegory of How Sociality Affects Gameplay

I will first present my own history and the position I came to hold in the game. This chapter is predominantly descriptive, and meant as allegory of how the social aspects emerge as a component of the game. It is also an example of the experience a player who has never played an MMORPG before looks like and how I eventually turned into a high-end raider, as well as how different a MMO is from a single-player game. The guild names and nicknames of the players mentioned have been altered to ensure their anonymity. The narrative style of which this chapter is written in is inspired by T.L. Taylors book “Play Between Worlds” (2006) as well as Lisbeth Klastrup’s “Milagros and the hunt for the golden pants” (Klastrup 2004:249-251).

I started WoW on its European release in February 2005. WoW was my first MMORPG, though I had always played single-player games with a special interest in the role-playing genre. The idea of a game that had thousands of players you could interact with and compete with had always attracted me, yet scared me due to the horror stories of addiction. As I had previously played Blizzard strategy game series WarCraft (Which WoW is also based on story and world wise), the world felt familiar and not so daunting. Two of my real life friends had also bought the game so we could play together. My two friends decided they would play characters belonging to the horde faction, whereas I chose to play on the alliance faction. One of my friends still plays today and made a new alliance character on my server, while the other quit the game after approximately a year. I quit the game nine months ago due to an injury in my arm and a burn-out which many players before me has suffered. After having played and researched WoW for over four years, I do feel I have been able to extract general trends of players, guilds and how they behave in the virtual World of Warcraft.

5.1 Virtually conceived

When I first entered the game, I decided I would roll a warrior since this is the archetype I have preferred in previous computer games: A strong melee based character. At that time when I made my innocent Night Elf Warrior of the Alliance, little did I know that after 7 months, I would be in a hardcore guild taking on the prestigious roles of being main tank, officer, classleader of the warriors and even raid leader at various raids. Back in February 2005 I did not even know what a tank was.

After finally having picked a name I was happy with, I entered the world. I started the game in the zone of Teldrassil, the starting zone for the night elf race.⁶ The world seemed at first too huge to navigate through compared to the single player games I was used to. After having leveled my warrior to level 25 by doing quests which mainly consisted of me killing different monsters or picking up items, I ran to a small quest hub town called Astranaar in the world zone of Ashenvale. I had an experience there that would later shape my motivation for playing the game and also one of the inspirations to this thesis.

5.2 The virtual hero

As I closed in on Astranaar, the message “Astranaar is under attack!” flashed out in the local defense chat channel. Ignorant of what that meant, I continued towards Astranaar where I soon saw a myriad of players and spells being cast. Some of these players were horde and by that easily spotted with their red colored names over their characters. Most of the alliance and horde players were about the same level as me as the zone Ashenvale is meant for level 20-30 questing. There was, however, one horde player who caught everyone’s attention; a lvl 40 orc warrior. This player was easy to pick out from the rest due to the looks of his equipment and no alliance player could stand a chance against him. He razed over everyone who dared facing him, making them corpse run back to resurrect - including me, who died countless times. This destruction went on for about an hour. Suddenly, another character

⁶ Almost all of the races in WoW have unique starting areas.

rides his mount into the small town. It was a level 60 paladin of the alliance. It was the first player I had seen who was level 60 and also the first player I saw that had a mount. The paladin dismounted from his horse and ran up to the orc warrior and with two short blows killed him, before continuing to bring destruction down on all the other horde players who had used the level 40 orc warrior as a shield. Some hordes tried to resurrect, but soon had to face defeat and withdraw since they have no chance against the high level paladin. After the paladin had saved us all, me and the other low level alliance players went up to him to have a look at, what to me back then, seemed like a god inside the game universe. I think all of the alliance players inspected this paladin, which is done by targeting a player, then right-click his portrait and choose “inspect” from a menu that pops up. We were in awe when we saw all his equipment; everything was blue or of rare quality. Many of the players did the /kneel and /cheer emote which makes you character display an animation where they kneel or cheer at the target to show their appreciation and respect. I felt very small next to this paladin and took numerous screenshots as he looked nothing like any player I had seen before, with his impressive high level equipment. My motivation and goal in the game changed after this encounter, I wanted to be just like this paladin. By this I do not mean level 60, but being a virtual hero that everyone looked up to and held in awe. This was my first encounter and experience with social status in a virtual world, as well as a sudden shift for me motivationally. Before this encounter was primarily aimed on reaching the maximum level, whereas after I was occupied with the aim of being “someone”. Motivational factors, and to what extent recognition by virtual peers are important for players are some of the topics I have investigated in this thesis.

5.3 My first virtual family

A few days after the Astranaar encounter, I received a whisper from an unknown mage player who asked if I was interested in joining their group which was going to the instance Blackfathom Deeps. I had never played in a group before and eagerly accepted. I had no idea where the instance was found, but the other members in the group helpfully gave

directions. After wiping several times, we finally killed the final boss and some of the party members even got a few low level blue items.

This first party I joined was a beginning of a long friendship. The mage who had asked me to join the party now asked if I wanted to join their guild. Back then I did not know exactly what a guild was; I had only seen a couple of players with a guild name under their names, not giving much attention to it. That I was recognized as a nice player was reason enough for me to join their small five man guild “The Keepers of Lore”. The guild was a very small and casual one. It consisted of the mage who was a 22 year old man from the Netherlands, a 34 year old Portuguese man who played a paladin, a 18 year old man from Turkey who played a druid, a 17 year old exchange student from the Caribbean now living in the Netherlands and me. The guild was far from hardcore, but we were exactly the right size to do 5 man dungeons. We were all slow levelers and the conversations in the guild chat revolved mainly around our personal lives. For instance when the 34 Portuguese paladin, Ignacio, got separated from his wife, we all comforted him. Occurrences and incidents from our real lives that we later shared in the guild chat created a strong bond between us.

The five of us “dinged” 60 about the same time by late May 2005. Shortly thereafter the mage and the druid came with the sad announcement that they were going to quit the game. The mage had gotten a girlfriend and the druid had to focus on his studies, leaving them both unavailable to play the game. Our small guild could not keep up with doing our small guild runs. Instead, we had to group up with other players we did not know. This is an example how the game requires the player to socially interact with other players in order to experience the content of the game. I have had no contact with the mage or the druid after they quit.

5.4 A virtual lesson

My first experience with a pick-up group or “Pug” was horrible; A priest was looking for a warrior for the ten man instance of Stratholme in the “LFG” (Looking For Group) channel. I whispered him and said I would join. I got invited and anxiously set out to meet the other

players of the group. We rendezvoused in front of the first trash pack of zombies in Stratholme, my first level 60 dungeon. When everyone was ready, the priest, also being the raid leader, ordered me to equip a shield and “tank” as I was the only warrior in the group. I had absolutely no idea what he meant by this, but did as he ordered and equipped a shield, trying not to look dumb in front of the other nine players who had much better equipment than me. I thought that maybe I had to wear a shield because my equipment was inferior to theirs, and therefore would receive less damage if I wore a shield. Before that I had always used a two-handed weapon, trying to do as much damage as possible in the small guild runs in “Keepers of Lore”. The first trash pack was pulled and as I usually did, I picked a random target and started beating on it. The other mobs wandered off to the other players and swiftly killed the healers and the casters wearing cloth. Because the healers were dead, the rest of us soon died as well. Seconds after this massacre, a mage in the raid wrote “Omfg” in the raid chat, followed by a hunter’s: “What a noob.” I did not know those comments were aimed at me before the rest of the raid members joined in, bashing me. The priest then whispered me: “You can’t tank for shit”. I got kicked out of the party and I was bewildered. I thought to myself that I had always been good in games, and how could they blame that wipe on me? I was not even the first one to die. It was, however, hurting and so different from the funny small guild runs I was used to. Now, I was instead, made a laughingstock, and felt like an embarrassment. I logged off for the day, thinking that I would hide my shame.

The next day I checked out the official forums for any threads on what the term of “tanking” meant. I quickly found out: Everything a player does like healing, hitting, casting a spell generates a certain amount of threat. The bigger the healing spell, or the more damage a ranged or melee attack does the more threat the player who casted or hit it will receive. The monsters in the game would always attack the player with the most threat towards it. Whoever was being attacked by the monster would have “aggro”⁷. As a tank, your job is to gain the aggro of all the mobs in combat with the players in the party. But by having the aggro of many mobs, means that you also have equipment with a lot of stamina (increases your health) and armor. In that period of the game’s life, warriors were the only class who could tank satisfyingly (Today, warriors, druids, paladins and death knights can also be just as

⁷ Short for Aggresiveness

viable for the role of tank). For a warrior to be a good tank, he would also need to put points deep in the protection talent tree. When I read all this I was very disappointed. Had I wasted 60 levels to be in equipment with mainly stamina and armor? I wanted to be a warrior, a tough brute who did damage. Doing high damage with a shield was impossible. After that, I always made sure that the parties for dungeons I joined up for already had a tank. However, back then, getting a healers and tank were very hard. In the end, I figured I had to learn the tanking sooner or later, so I wouldn't have to rely on others. I started off by doing some easy instances. I had "respecced"⁸ from my Arms talent build to a Protection one I found in a tanking guide on the official forums. I had also read up on posts how to keep the aggro on me by using abilities that generated a high amount of threat towards the mobs I was targeting. I started off my tanking career by doing some of the easiest instances, and also made Ignacio and the priest, Ekkid come so I would not have to fend off four angry strangers if I failed at my task. After numerous instances and reading more up on strategies experienced tanks had given on forums I finally felt like I was starting to understand the mechanics of tanking and not make other people in my party die by not generating enough threat on mobs. On the official forums I also found a guide with a list of different items that a tank should have. The list pointed out where to find this item and how to enchant them. As I painfully learned, not knowing the game mechanics can have a severe social and emotional consequences for a player. A player not knowing the basic game mechanics will quickly find himself without anyone to group with.

5.5 The real virtual deal

After some weeks of intense playing I felt sure of my own tanking capabilities and people I had been in party with even remembered me and asked me if I wanted to tank for their parties again. I had even gotten most of the tanking items on the list. The guild grew quieter

⁸ Respeccing is done by going to your class trainer and pay a set fee to re-allocate all the talents points in your talent tree. If a healing priest would want to do more damage he would have to respect to shadow; ie put most of his talent points in the shadow talent tree.

by then since Ekkid, the priest almost never logged on, and It was mostly just me and Ignacio on. We felt we had to move on to something bigger and better.

We both applied to the same guild, Champions of Valor, and got accepted. They did guild runs to 10 and 15 man instances and had about 50 members. A forum for its members, plus a DKP system to evenly distribute loot was being used by the guild. The first instance I did with this guild was Stratholme; an instance which I by now had become quite comfortable by tanking, now knowing how every part and boss of the instance worked. This first run was a huge success; I was even whispered by the guildmaster telling me how a great job I did as a tank. Ignacio and I stayed in this guild for about two months when the guild swiftly started to break apart; many of the guild members had a problem with how the guildmaster rudely handled its members and how he used his position as a way of getting the loot he wanted. The guild was reduced to a few members, and again my trusty Portuguese friend and I had to move on. Instead of joining a new guild, Ignacio had a better idea: Why not start our own guild, with our own rules? I was excited by this idea, and I talked to some of the players I had on my friends list who I had added after doing dungeons with them and they were also up for joining a guild if we made one. And on July 3rd, the guild “The Seventh Legion” was born. Ignacio and I would both act as guildmasters, but he was given the official rank as he came up with the idea. The “friends” I had previously asked if were interested, joined the guild on the first day it was created. Shortly thereafter, I made a forum for the guild and posted a recruitment post on the realm (server) forum. To our surprise we had over 60 members during the first week. AS we had no quality control, we invited everyone who was over level 50 and wanted to join. The following weeks the guild grew and we did all the hardest 10 and 15 man dungeons and my character was in the best blue gear⁹ you could acquire at that point.

⁹ There are different kinds of gear of WoW. The quality of the gear is defined by color codes: Blue gear is equal to superior, while green gear is equal to common etc.

5.6 A virtual milestone

One day during one of our guild runs to the 15 man of UBRS (Upper Blackrock Spire) I received a whisper from a player and guildmaster whose guild, Draconia, would later become my characters home for over 3 years. He wondered if Ignacio and mine's guild would want to do a joint raid where the best players from our guild and his joined up to try the first high-end 40 man raiding instance: The Molten Core. I knew this instance was much harder than anything I have ever been in, but we accepted his offer.

The following Sunday I could almost feel the excitement of the 40 players who had gathered in the first cave-like room of the Molten Core. This instance was not like the 5, 10 and 15 man dungeons I had done before; this was a place only the best came to play. This was an instance where you would be looked upon as a celebrity by all the other players of the game if you managed to even just kill one boss. The guildmaster of the other guild we had joined up had purchased a Ventrilo server to be able to raid lead better and we all had to download the VoIP program Ventrilo and join the server to listen in to commands. The mood of the channel felt much like a first day at a new school; nobody dared talking and if someone said something it was with nervousness in their voice and was met with an awkward silence. All the healers in the raid were also given strict instructions to download and install certain add-ons to make the healing and de-cursing easier. All serious raiding guilds have certain requirements their members have to meet in order to be allowed to raid by the leaders of the guild. The most common requirements are that the players join the guild's VoIP system and that certain add-ons are installed.

There were four other warriors in the raid who were "spec'ed" for tanking and all of us were standing there uneasy, waiting for whom of us the raidleader would choose to tank the two Big Molten Giants mobs standing not far from us. A warrior from the other guild and I was chosen to tank, simply because we were the only one who were defense capped¹⁰. A tank in a high end raiding guild has to be defense capped; if he is not, mobs in high-end instances

¹⁰ To be defense capped means that the tank has enough of the defense stat to avoid crushing blows from bosses or mobs.

will be able to critically hit him - almost always resulting in death since the healers will be unable to heal the high bursts of damage he will receive.

I felt incredibly nervous to be given this task. My hands were sweating. If my tanking skills were not good enough by not being able to hold aggro, I would make an embarrassment of myself, as well as my guild, The Seventh Legion which I was co-guildmaster of. The fact that I had the eyes of 39 other people on me did not ease my nervousity Thankfully, I was able to hold aggro and we were even able to reach the first boss of the Molten Core, The naga lady Lucifron. We wiped horribly a dozen times on this boss, before we gave up – but we were all proud of even making it past the trash mobs and knew that if we read up on the boss on strategies posted by various forums, that we would be able to kill her at a later time. Most guild who were able to scrape together 40 players never made it past the first trash.

5.7 The becoming of a raider

A new joint guild raid never happened. Instead, the guildmaster of Draconia asked if Ignacio and I would like to join his guild as it would be easier planning and organizing raids if we were in the same guild. He asked if we could bring with us 10 of our most skilled and best geared members. We were skeptical to this proposition at first. We knew that once we were gone, The Seventh Legion would fall together like a house of cards as most raiding guilds do without organized leadership. Due to this, Ignacio and I first turned down his offer, but he then raised the stakes by promising us the position of officers if we would agree to his offer, (It is common that some of the highest standing officers of both guilds get officer positions in the guild after merge.) After some discussions, we agreed; we both wanted to see the high-end raiding and not being limited to what was considered instances for casuals. The idea of being an officer, were also highly attractive as it would give high status in the game if we were able to succeed as a raiding guild. As expected, The Seventh Legion slowly died after we left, there was no one left who could spare the effort to keep the ship afloat.

5.8 The first taste for virtual glory

In the first raid after Ignacio, I and 10 of the best players had joined Draconica, we were able to kill Lucifron. Everyone were in ecstasy, many were shouting joyfully out on ventrilo, others made their characters dance in front of the corpse of the dead boss by typing the command /dance. It was an adrenaline rush, and when the raid leader master looted a pair of epic gloves for the warrior epic set off the boss' corpse, my heart started beating faster. There were five other warriors in the raid who also wanted these gloves, and there was probably going to be a roll between us. However, the raidleader suddenly gave them to me while he was announcing to the raid that he thought I should have them since he thought I had been doing such a great job on the boss. This was my first epic loot in the game, and I had previously only drooled over the two or three other warriors on the server who had any high-level epic items from Molten Core. People were whispering me to congratulate me on my new gloves. Everyone in the raid teleported back to Ironforge, the most crowded alliance city, where we positioned ourselves in the middle between the bank and auction house to show off our new loot and achievement. In WoW, word travels fast. Many players in a raid whisper acquaintances and friends in the game e.g. whenever a previously undefeated boss is killed. Many strangers I did not even know flocked around me to inspect my new gloves. For the first time in WoW, I felt like that paladin I had seen in Ashenvale months before. I was distinguished from the rest, with my epic gloves and my guild tag above my name.

5.9 A virtual Coup D'état

After some months, our guild reached and managed to kill the last boss of The Molten Core, Ragnaros, the fire god. We then farmed Molten Core for a month, before everyone had enough gear to move on to a new and harder instance that was just released: Blackwing Lair. There were currently three other guilds on the server who were ahead of us in progress, but we were slowly catching up to them. The race was on: we increased our raids times from three days a week, then to four days, and finally to five days a week. And when we killed Nefarian, the last boss of Blackwing Lair we were the number two guild in progress on the

server. After Blackwing Lair, the Egypt inspired instance of Ahn'Qiraj was released. The guild had gone through major changes since we had killed that first boss in Molten Core; the guild had taken on a more military form of hierarchy. The officers had kicked quite a few members, just because they did not meet our standards. We did not have to worry about having enough players for raids anymore; players were standing in line to get into our guild and have a taste of our progress and all the epic items. On our guild forums we received new applications daily from players wanting in. During Ahn'Qiraj (which was also when I started my research for this thesis), the majority of the officers went behind the guildmasters back and planned a virtual "Coup D'état"; He had stopped raid leading, and had given us all the responsibility. The officers, of whom I was one, felt frustrated and annoyed when he ignored us when we suggested changes in how the the guild was to be organized. All of the officers were also class leaders, meaning that they had the responsibility for all the members in the guild with the same class as them. All the different classes also had a unique chat channel created in the game to coordinate during raids without spamming the raidchat. In these chat channels, the class leader would give instructions to his class before a boss, or the members would ask their class leader if they had any questions about an encounter or strategies. A lot of joking and bonding were also happening in these channels, making the players in the guild of the same class very close. Personally, I was the class leader of the warriors and created close friendships with many of the warriors in the guild. The same was true for the other classleaders, and we in turn used the loyalty given by members of our classes to threaten the guildmaster: If he did not give his guildmaster rights to one of us, we would quit the guild and create a new one. The guildmaster knew that all of us, the class leaders, had the loyalty of our class, and gave away his rights and title as a guildmaster shortly thereafter. We made him an officer, so the fall would not be that long, but his playing became more infrequent, until he eventually quit the game.

After we had cleared Ahn'Qiraj, there were a few months of idling in the guild, since Blizzard had not released any new instances. The new raid instance, Naxxramas, that came out was the last Blizzard would release before the new expansion The Burning Crusade. Naxxramas was the hardest instance Blizzard had made and few guilds in the world managed to complete it. (Naxxramas was seen by so few players that Blizzard decided to re-release it in

an easier version in the second expansion Wrath of the Lich King¹¹.) The bosses here were much harder than we were used to, making the guild even more elitist; we only gave raid spots to our best and most well-equipped players, letting the less skilled and undergeared stand down, everyone in the raid were also supposed to know each boss battle in and out even before we had encountered it by reading up on forums. We were not focused whether nice and social players were neglected, we were purely focusing on being the best. This is an issue which is later explored more thoroughly in the thesis.

5.10 A bittersweet end

As we progressed through Naxxramas, we were rapidly catching up to the other guild which was still in front of us in progress. The idea that we might beat them and be the top guild on the server lead to that we, the officers, increased the days for raiding to seven days a week. Thankfully, we killed the last boss in the instance two weeks after. We had beaten the other guild by three bosses, and we were even among the top guilds in the world. Personally, I had the best gear a tank could have, and was also the best geared on server at that time. I was the biggest celebrity on the server, and some players who I not know even made a fan club guild as tribute to me. But it came at a price; from my first raid in Molten Core up until we killed Kel'Thuzad, the last boss of Naxxramas, I had spent over 1200 hours¹² raiding, not counting the all the other time I spent with the game, or things related to the game like reading forums.

I also played the second expansion, The Burning Crusade, in which our guild still kept our position as best on server until the last instance of that expansion was released. People were starting to burn out, and more of our core members quit, and personally I had to stop playing due to an injury. It came to a point where the guild could not get enough members to raid, even if Blizzard had decreased the maximum size of a raid from 40 to 25 members.

¹¹ <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=13269086867&pageNo=2&sid=1#36>

¹² This amount of time was easily found by checking the guilds DKP system which keeps track of all members' attendance to raids.

The guild tried many new recruits, but most of them did not make it through the trial¹³ period. We had simply raised the bar too high. Not having enough members to raid leads to a downward spiral for guilds, since the members who want to raid get frustrated and restless by not being able to raid, they eventually will join another guild. Many of the members, officers included, got tired of the poorly skilled or badly equipped recruits and the half-filled raids and left the guild to join others. A few members did stay in Draconia hoping that the situation would get better, but the guild as a high-end raiding guild slowly died.

¹³ Most high-end guilds got a trial period for new recruits. This means that new players invited to the guild have a set period of time to show the officers of the guild that they meet the guild standards. If they do, they get promoted to members, and if they don't they get kicked.

6. Sociality and motivation for hardcore players

As described, some players actively play the game for hours on end daily in guilds referred to as high-end. Is one of the reasons that some players sacrifice so much time to not lose their place in the hierarchy or to move up the social ladder?

A smaller percentage of the so-called “casuals” do not recognize that such a hierarchy even exists. Paradoxically, from conversations with some of the casual gamers, it is interesting to see that some of them have a goal to join a high-end guild to improve their social status/rank in their game as well as getting to see the hardest content and receiving better gear for their character. As social status is often very important for many in the physical world, the same is true for the inhabitants of the virtual worlds. Elizabeth Reid in her study of power and control in MUDs states that “At the heart of many human activities lies the wish for influence and power” and asserts that the same is true in online games.

Whereas single player games, where the main goal is to complete the game and see the credits roll after beating the end boss, the goals of MMORPGs are often more complex and often differ from player to player. I have through my collection of data from players found interesting data of how important it is for players to be recognized in some way by their peers. For instance, some people want to excel in beating the hardest monsters in the game, whereas others aim at being infamous by killing other players. Either way, it seems that most players want to leave some kind of mark on the virtual world in the minds of other players. But like in the real world, where performing a “PR stunt” would not necessarily increase your social status, the same is true for the virtual world of WoW. If a player undresses himself in one of the crowded virtual cities and runs around every night shouting something profane for everyone to read, it would not gain him with regards to social status.

He would, of course, be recognized and people would know who he was, but he would have a hard time joining any serious guilds. Based on this (true) example and other data I will analyze and discuss how social status and place in the hierarchy is not only based on reputation, but also respect as Taylor and Jakobssen also argue. (Taylor et al 2003)

Many high-end raiding guilds usually raid most days of the week from four to six hours each day if there are instances out they have not gotten on farm i.e. that the guild can clear the entire dungeon/instance in a week without problems. A natural question to ask is what kind of motivation they have to sacrifice so much time and why they do it. This was a central question in my own empirical research and was a central topic in depth interviews with other high-end raiders. I interviewed seven high-end raiders who had raided for more than two years in a time period of 6 months. One of the persons I interviewed used to be a hardcore raider, but quit due to a burn-out. This is not an uncommon thing to do. If you have played in a high-end raiding guild for several years you are almost bound to encounter these burn-outs among other guild members. On the other side, however, there are players who have actively played actively on a daily basis since the release of the game and are still going strong. In this chapter I will investigate why some players suddenly bring their virtual life to an abrupt end by quitting the game altogether versus those players who actively raid each day without getting tired of the game or feel that they put their real life aside to be able to live in the virtual world instead.

6.1 The sacrifice

A natural question that arises when you interview hardcore players is why they sacrifice so much time and effort to play the game. Many of the players I interviewed played for about five hours or more every day, and judging by how my own playing took up almost all my free time, it is hard to see that this does not affect their real world social relations. So what is it with the game that makes it so attractive that some players are willing to spend most of their free time inside a virtual world?

My first question was whether playing computer games already was an integral part of their lives even before they started World of Warcraft. Had they played any MMOs before or spent significant time playing other games? Was gaming already a big part of their lifestyle?

All of my informants were playing computer games before they started playing WoW.

However, only one of them had played an MMO before. The general trend was that most of my informants were used to playing online with other people mostly in FPS games like Counter-strike, Call of Duty etc. Many were also playing RTS games online like the WarCraft series, Starcraft, Red Alert etc. prior to World of Warcraft. Almost everyone had also been playing single player games either on PC or console.

Playing World of Warcraft leaves little time for other games though, as one informant who used to play a lot of CS expressed:

[...] I rarely ever play CS anymore. There is always a raid happening or herbs to be farmed in WoW. And you also kinda feel an urge to see what's going on in the guild. – Darkeagle

Another player describes the same situation, but also remarks that WoW saves him money:

Well, I still play other games but like only the really good ones like MGS, GTA and stuff. And games of really good quality don't come out that often anyway. And I also save a lot of money by playing WoW than constantly buying new games when I have completed the old. Since most single-player games only take like ten to thirty hours. - Seraphim

As this player describes, it is not only the raiding that takes time but also getting virtual gold to be able to repair equipment, buy items etc. When you get new pieces of equipment you are also expected in most high-end raiding guilds to buy the best enchants and gems¹⁴ to enhance your gear. Neglecting or failing to do this can sometimes have severe social consequences. In serious raiding guilds, players can often be kicked out of the guild if he does

¹⁴ Enchants are provided by players who take and level up the Enchanting profession. Enchants can be applied to almost all pieces of equipment (head, chest, gloves etc) and give an increase to a certain stat. Gems work in the same way except they are made by players of the profession "jewelcrafting". Gems can however only be applied to pieces of equipment with "gem slots".

not buy the best (which are also the most expensive) enchants for his gear. Not optimizing one's gear is seen as leeching off other guild members who have taken the time and effort to buy the best possible enchants and gems for the guild as a whole to be able to progress faster. On most new boss encounters there is also obligatory in high-end raiding guilds to "pot" or "flask". "Potting" and "flasking" refers to drinking elixirs or flasks made by players of the alchemist professions which increases your characters stats. All the extra time used to "farm" money for enchants, gems and pots is often seen as the most boring aspect of the game since it requires monotonous playing that take hours. This can often lead to that players are forced to go against Blizzard's policy by buying gold from different goldselling websites. On these websites, virtual gold is bought for real money. One informant could not keep up with both the raiding the money farming and his real life so he had no other solution than to quit the game:

If it was just the raids it would be fine, but when I have to run around like an idiot for hours killing the same mob in addition to get gold, it just gets silly. I do want to do things in real life as well. – Soprano

This informant had to quit simply because he did not have the time to get gold alongside raiding. Raiding without gold is impossible, since a player has to be able to repair his equipment, buy elixirs and potions as well as enchants for whatever new gear he might receive.

Another informant had a different view on the gold farming that many players have to do to be able to raid.

I never understood those people who QQ [whine] about getting gold. Just download auctioneer¹⁵; buy stuff at low prices, and sell them again when prices go up – badabing – you earned 2k in a day – Duke

From my experience, however, only a small percentage of players play the auction house, buying at low prices and selling at high. What most players do is just killing a certain mob

¹⁵ "Auctioneer is an add-on for the game that stores all prices at the auction house. By using this add-on, players can find the average prices for items to know what the best time is to sell and buy.

that dies easily and gives a fair amount of cash or utilizes their profession to either gather ores or herbs in order to sell them at the auction house without paying attention if they are selling at the best attainable price. Regardless of how you get your income in WoW, the fact is that for a high-end raider it is not only the raids that take time. Farming, talking to in-game friends, reading forums, customizing their interface also take up a significant amount of time.

6.2 Playing with “friends”

So what are the player’s motivations for spending so much time with only one game? There will not be one answer to this – but I was set out to find if there was a general trend among hardcore players for what their motivation was. Did they just enjoy the game so much, or are the people they play with, the ones who make them spend such a significant amount of time in front of the computer?

I play primarily to have fun with my friends, but also to challenge myself on bosses by always trying to push higher DPS(damage per second). And I don’t know why, but it’s always fun to get gear and see the numbers[all your attacks in wow can be seen as numbers] go higher. The most fun is when a new instance is just released and you get insane gear and your numbers go through the roof. – Darkeagle

This player explains that his main reason for spending so much time with the game is to have fun with his friends. He does, however, also find motivation in getting new gear to improve his damage. It can be added here, that playing flagrantly for loot is often seen as taboo in high-end raiding guilds. Listing the wish to get better loot in a guild as your main goal is seen as selfish and “politically incorrect” as you are meant to play for the guild to progress and not for your own improvement. If a player applies to a guild and writes in the application that his main objective in the guild is to get better loot, he will in most cases be rejected. Many of the other informants gave the reason of wanting to play with friends, but in a slightly different manner like, e.g.

I could either come home from school, make dinner and spend the rest of the night in front of the TV watching some crap, or I can hang out with the people in the guild having a laugh. For me playing replaces television. - Duke

Many used the same argument of why they spent so much time with the game; they compared TV with playing. They all probably had the attitudes found in the media around MMOs in the back of their head when they answered the question why they spent so much time in the game. Why should playing MMOs be frowned upon while watching TV for hours every day is seen as acceptable and a part of a “normal” person’s lifestyle?

Darkagle explained that by friends, he meant in-game friends, around four-five other players who were in the same guild as him but with whom he had never met in real life. When I asked if he saw in-game friends the same as his real life friends in terms of closeness he pointed out that to him they were two very separate things:

They can’t really be compared. With your real life friends you talk about everything like if you feel shit one day or about girl problems, but with friends in the game you basically limit the conversation to topics around the game. - darkeagle

Asking the other informants the same question, almost all of them agreed that in-game friends are something very different than real life friends. One informant compared in-game friends to co-workers:

In-game friends are almost like co-workers; you work with them, talk to them, crack jokes, but at the end of the day they are not really your friends with whom you share your entire life with. If my mother died or something, I would never tell it to the people in the guild. - Rush

The one female informant who I had an in-depth interview with had a different perspective on the question though:

I call a lot of the people I know in the game friends, but only a handful can be called true friends – but these are people I’ve actually first met in the game

and then decided to meet in real life. I kind of turned the in-game friends into real life friends (laughs) – Lilamy

And strangely enough during my in-game conversations via the text chat provided in the game with other girls who played the game they had a very different take on in-game friends versus real life friends than male players. One female player was of the opinion that it was easier to get to know people in the game, than in the real world:

Me: Do you think you can get to know people in-game just as well as you could IRL?[In real life]

Fonita: "tbh [to be honest] I think its a lot easier to see how people really are ingame than IRL[In real life].

Fonita: Sure there are retards, but you quickly figure out who the serious ones are. Like Koki, Jaden and Endisnigh [Players who are her in-game friends] <3 [A heart, meaning that she is fond of them].

Fonita: I think of those as my friends. And If I ever meet them I know we would be just as good friends IRL.

Me: So are you gonna plan like a RL meeting or something?

Fonita: Yeh, we might have a meet in summer actually xD [Smiley]

Interestingly, it seemed like the gap in defining an in-game friend and a real life friend was much smaller for female player. This gap could easily be closed if the players wanted to by meeting the in-game friends in real life. The assertion that many female players may be more interested in the social aspects of the game than male is supported by Taylor (2006), although one should be careful of making such gender generalizations.

My next question to my informants was what defined "friends" in the game? Perhaps one should have defined what a friend is in real life first– but I will allow myself to let this be explained by the definition provided by the dictionary:

“A person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard.”¹⁶

So is this definition valid for the virtual world of an MMO as well? One might think that making friends in virtual worlds are easier, since people can be tied together by gameplay mechanics such as grouping, raiding, trading etc. However, after talking to my informants this assumption quickly became void. One player had heavy criteria before calling anyone a friend in the game:

I have to play with them at least for half a year before I call them a friend. Just because they are on your friends list, doesn't make them my friend. Friend lists should rather be called human resource list. Since most of the people you add there are usually just people you want to group with because you know they are a good healer, or give free enchants or something. – Rush

All the other informants were also careful when it came to describing other players as their friends:

I talk to a lot of people every day in the guild in the guild chat and on vent. But it takes quite a lot before I refer to them as friends. To be honest, if like 90% of the guild would quit playing, I wouldn't really be sad... Well, maybe since it would hard to get a raid together, but on a personal level I wouldn't really care. – Seraphim

So why are players so reluctant to call in-game friends for real friends? Taylor (2006) wants to remove the idea that players of MMORPGs are anti-social, and stresses the notion that people in the game can be seen as just as much friends as those in real life. Unfortunately, this seems like it is not the case, as even players find it hard to call in-game friends for real friends. From a cynical point of view, many players may even see other players as just a required resource to progress in the game or as Rush expresses: “A human resource list”. This can again be argued from the play style and motivation of the individual player, but the fact is that when all content is cleared and no new content is coming out for months, most players (especially in raiding guilds) have a tendency to take a break from the game until new content is released. The fact is that most people bought the product to play the game

¹⁶ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/friend>

because of its more technical features i.e. gameplay graphics, world etc., and meeting and interacting with other people is just a positive bi-product that makes the game more emergent and less predictable. From a sociological view, it can be argued that people draw together, making the social interaction the goal of the game itself. Killing an especially hard dragon may for instance not be so fun and satisfying, if you did not do it in collaboration with virtual friends. Guilds in World of Warcraft are, for instance, often compared to virtual families. (Williams et al. 2006).

6.3 Guild members: Family or co-workers?

In MMOs as in the real life society a person/player has several different social arenas he might engage in either if he binds long lasting relationships to other players through a guild or join parties with strangers to conquer a dungeon. Leveling a character in WoW to reach the end-game¹⁷ usually requires you taking an active role in the social arena because most of the end-game content is designed for a group of players coordinating. (Taylor 2003) The primary social arena for many players, however, are the guilds. By joining a guild a player will take part in a small community for better or for worse as I later will explain in more detail. A player I interviewed even referred to the guild as a family:

<Guildname> is almost like a family. People are always happy to see you and I think they genuinely care for you. Hell, when I think about it, I probably spend more time with the guild people than I do with my IRL family.

But what most players as well as researchers forget or fail to observe, is that it is the game that works as the glue between them when it comes to topics of conversation. Even if you find yourself talking to other players many hours a day, this is usually alongside playing the game and talking about the game. During my ethnography, I listened to and participated in numerous conversations with players. During raids the talk among players was almost limited to talk about the game and the players talking in a raid would even get yelled at from

¹⁷ End-game is the definition of the content the game has to offer for players who have reached the highest attainable level. End-game content is usually referred to as raiding instances that require 10 to 25 players.

the raid leader if they were talking about something that was not related to the current encounter the raid was at. This was completely different from my previous small guild, where conversation of this type was always welcome. When the raid reached a boss, this became even more evident; if a player said something irrelevant he would quickly be ordered to “shut up” by one of the officers and even sometimes by other players who focusing on the fight. Another player I interviewed who had played the game since its release emphasizes the fact that a huge portion of conversations with other players are about the game:

“You can talk to a person every day for hours and think you are very close to this person... But I mean, everyone quits this game eventually. I’ve seen a lot of people come and go in the guild. It’s always very sad to see people you spent a lot of time with quit the game. They leave a sappy goodbye post on the forum and you kind of feel sad for a little time but the person is usually forgotten within two weeks. For all I know, all the people who have quit the guild could be dead, and I wouldn’t know.”

As a follow up question, I asked if he might have kept contact with people who had left the game via other communication programs:

“I have added tons of people to MSN who have left the game. But I never talk to them. I mean, I wouldn’t know what to talk about with them anymore when we can’t talk about the game. Sure, I sometimes talk to a few, but it’s usually just the ‘hey mate, how are you?’ ‘good’ and then nobody can think of anything to talk about.”

To me this also ringed true – as I have played the game over a period of several years I had too added a lot of people to my contacts on MSN. I talked to some of them, but also in my case, the conversations revolved around the game and other players in the guild. If there was some drama in the guild, for instance once when a player got kicked out of the guild with no reason being given in the guild chat, I talked to several inquiring guild members why that person was kicked. However, as my informant above stated, I have kept limited or no contact with the players who quit the game. My empirical data shows that very few players in raiding guilds continues to have contact with former player friends or guild members who quit the game.

7. Playing Styles

7.1 Different taxonomies

There have been various attempts to categorize different players. The reason why I use the word “attempts” is because there is still an on-going academic discussion on how to create this taxonomy to best put players in a category that is cohesive with how they play their game. I will now present the theories and frameworks that have been introduced to categorize different types of players.

Richard Bartle’s taxonomy is the first recognized categorization of different player types. He has created this taxonomy from a study of players in MUDs. In his taxonomy he asserts that there primarily exist four different types of players. These categories are those of

- Achiever
- Explorer
- Killer
- Socializer

These categories are supposed to cover player types both in single-player and multi-player games. Players who set out goals for themselves in the game and the means to achieve them would fit into Bartle’s taxonomy of achievers. A player in WoW who is an end-game raider always trying to beat the hardest bosses and getting the best items would typically fall into this category. Players who fall into the category of explorers on the other hand are the type who likes to explore the game world, read the quests, and find out the lore behind the key NPCs. Socializers are the type of players who play the games to communicate and interact with other players. Their goal in the game is to make friends, or they already have friends from the real world in the game and mainly play to hang out with them in the virtual world. Bartle also places roleplayers in the socializer category. Killers are the opposite of socializers.

Players in the killer category thrive on killing and wrecking havoc for other players. In Wow players referred to as “gankers” fit perfectly into this category. A ganker is a player who kills players that are of lower levels. Other players of WoW who fit into this category are players who kill players who have very little health from for example fighting a mob.

Bartle’s taxonomy does look good in theory, but as game researcher Faltin Karlsen (2004) argues, it does not work in practice because a player often shift, between these categories or belong to more of them at the same time. Karlsen points out the limitations of Bartle’s taxonomy by showing that for example, powergamers can not convincingly be kept inside on category. He illustrates this point by looking at the powergamer, a type of player who in Bartle’s taxonomy would fall into the achiever category due to the powergamers drive to achieve goals like beating a raid instance. Karlsen, however, criticizes this categorization by arguing the fact that for players to be powergamers, they are also usually socializers. This point is especially evident in a game like WoW because in order to be a hardcore player you have to team up with others. None of the best items in the game can be acquired by solo play, and none of the hardest bosses or dungeons can be conquered alone. Even the best player versus player rewards require that you have at least one other player you actively communicate with and during battle plan with. The point is that to be able to set out and achieve the hardest goals in the game (which also rewards you with the best items), you have to socialize with other people. A hardcore guild which main goal is to beat hard dungeons usually has a huge social dimension. The players hang out in VoIP¹⁸ chatrooms and talk to each other for hours when they are not partaking in a raid and if there are days where there are no guild events planned, the members usually do some game activities together even if they do not achieve anything new. Some players might make alts just to play together with a person they have come to like especially well. Other players might just stand with their characters in a city making small talk. As a player in the guild I was in stated:

“It’s the game that draws you in, but it’s the people that make you stay.”

Instead of making a taxonomy of different player styles, Karlsen argues that a taxonomy that categorizes player behavior rather than the players themselves is a better way of analyzing

¹⁸ Voice over IP: Telephony over the internet

how players emerge in a game. This way, it will be better to analyze players who are not confined to only one of Bartle's categories.

Yee has attempted to make a taxonomy that is much more agreeable to Karlsen's demand for categorization of behavior in play rather than player types. Nick Yee calls his taxonomy "Model for player motivation".

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement Progress, Power, Accumulation, Status	Socializing Casual Chat, Helping Others, Making Friends	Discovery Exploration, Lore, Finding Hidden Things
Mechanics Numbers, Optimization, Templating, Analysis	Relationship Personal, Self-Disclosure, Find and Give Support	Role-Playing Story Line, Character History, Roles, Fantasy
Competition Challenging Others, Provocation, Domination	Teamwork Collaboration, Groups, Group Achievements	Customization Appearances, Accessories, Style, Color Schemes
		Escapism Relax, Escape from RL, Avoid RL Problems

Figure 6 "Model for player motivation". The Daedalus project (2008) by Yee.

Instead of trying to fit a player into one specific category, Yee's model works in the way that a player different motivations for playing the game. In Yee's model there are three main components overarching ten subcomponents. The model works in such a way that a player can give scores to whatever part of the game he likes the most found in the subcomponents tables. And whatever column (component) he or she scores highest in gives a good idea of what kind of motivation he or she has in the game. For instance, a player who scored high in the subcomponents: numbers, progress and challenging others would be a player who has achievement as his or her main motivation. As we can see from the model, above Yee has taken Bartle's Achiever and Killer player type and merged them. He has also changed the Bartle's Explorer to Immersion which holds the subcomponent of customization which holds components such as appearances, accessories, style etc. As I later will illustrate these components can just as well be placed in the achievement component. Receiving new equipment will give players the means to progress further in the game, increase their

powers as well as give status. Having a well equipped character can also be your key to joining a high-end guild which can again change the social dimensions a player experiences. In World of Warcraft it will also become problematic to keep the two components of social and achievement apart because of the fact that if you want to achieve something as conquering a hard dungeon you will need a vast resource of other players in form of a guild.

7.2 Folk taxonomy

The players of WoW have their own taxonomy. This taxonomy usually defines player types out from what players actively spend time on in the game.

- Social – A player who primarily is in the game to chat.
- Casual PvEr/PvPer – A player who primarily does 5-man instances or participates in battlegrounds
- Hardcore PvPer – A player who spends several hours in the PvP arena on a daily basis and has a good organized arena team.
- Hardcore PvEr / Raider – A player who belongs to a high-end raiding guild and weekly partakes in several guild raids in the newest released raiding instances.
- Hardcore PvP/PvEr – A player who spends an excessive amount of time both by doing arenas on a high level and raids with his high-end raiding guild.

Whereas Bartle's taxonomy defines types of players out from their predetermined goals in all games, the styles of play in the folk taxonomy can easily be switched between. A player can for instance be a hardcore raider, and then one day decide to switch to casual PvP if he is tired of doing raids.

8. Survey: Social status and recognition

During the fall 2008, I conducted a survey (appendix I) in which 46 players of WoW participated. Of these, 27 players characterized themselves as hardcore PvErs i.e. that they

raid the hardest and newest instances regularly, while the rest placed themselves in other categories, such as PvPer, casual etc. (Figure 7). 42 of the participants were male whereas 4 were female. The goal of the survey was to map out how important social status and recognition within the game are to players both casual and hardcore.

The survey also consisted of a series of additional questions in order to try and map out the social hierarchy that exists inside the virtual world. Was there a player of a certain playing style that topped the hierarchy as a group of players whom other players of less dedicated playing styles were looking up to?

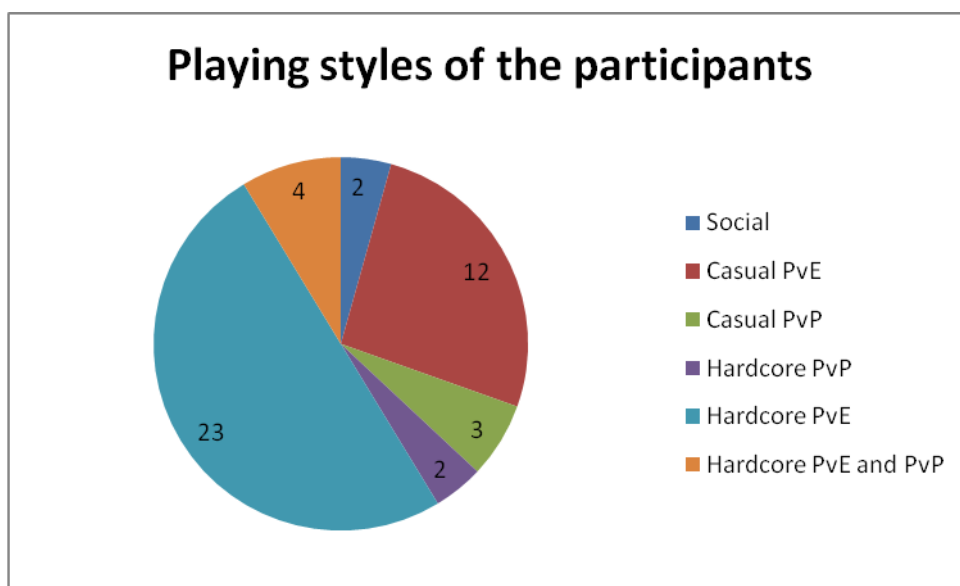


Figure 7 Playing styles of the participants

When I asked the participants in the survey whether it was important to them that other players recognized them as good players 93% of the participants answered yes. One has to keep in mind that most of my informants were hardcore raiders who spent an extensive amount of hours within the game each day. If I had conducted a survey with only casual players as participants the survey might have produced completely different data. I was, however, mostly interested in what kept the hardcore raiders spend such an excessive amount within the game. Was one of the reasons that these players spent so much time to

show others their skills and superiority over other players? The hardcore raider Duke gave this reply:

Of course it's important that others think you are good. Cause otherwise you wouldn't get decent groups. That's how it works. If people think you are good, you have an easier game time. – Duke

This players point of view on other's recognition/praise of you, as a player, is cohesive with Taylor's (2006) argument that your social relations within the game are the deciding factor if whether you succeed in an MMO or not:

Reputation plays a significant role in a gamer's success because at a basic level reputation determines both being able to secure groups over long term, as well as being admitted into a guild. – Taylor (2006:43)

This, again, raises the question, whether players make friends just to progress in the game, or if they make friends with others because they like their company. To be able to join a good and respectable guild, you need to have a good reputation. And Taylor points out that the "main mechanisms that work in all guilds, to varying degrees, are reputation, trust and responsibility."

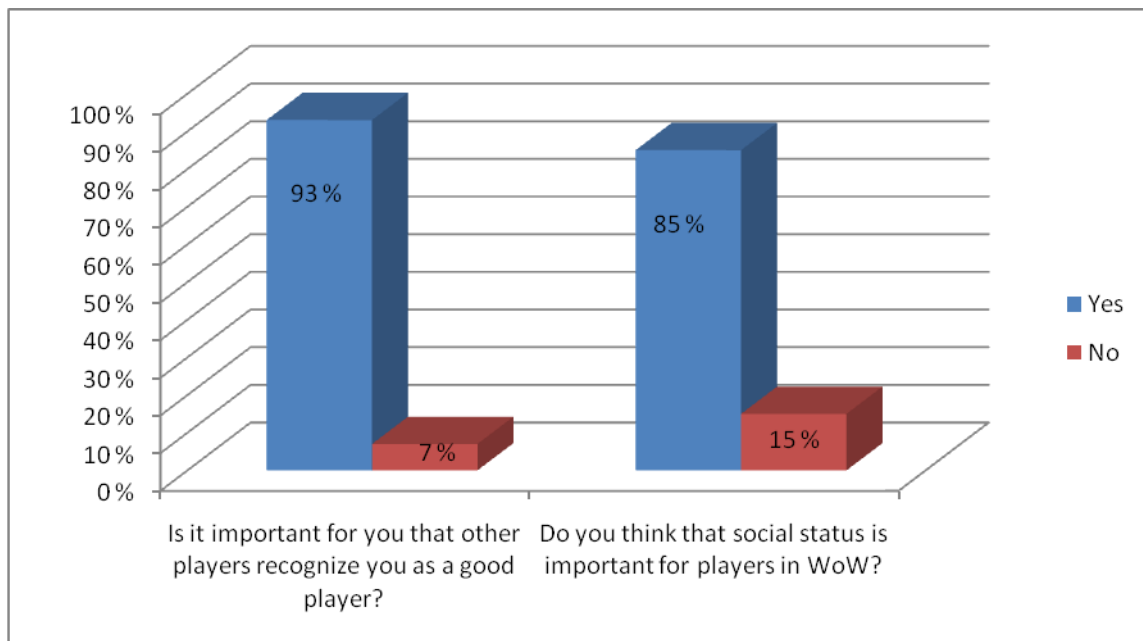


Figure 8 – Survey: Social recognition

Some players (7%) who participated in the survey, however, did not think it mattered what others thought of them. This was especially true when I asked some casual players in the game.

I play this game to have fun and relax. I don't care what other people think about me. I pay monthly to play and if I want to for example farm honorkills instead of capturing bases in BGs I have every right to. – Johnnycd, male 25

For others the question was not what other people thought of them in terms of skill, but what they thought of them as persons:

To me, it doesn't matter if other players think I am a noob. Most hardcore people, think everyone equipped with anything less than epics are noobs anyway. I do however care if other people think I am nice. I don't want to be an asshole and ninja stuff and shit. – Baragio, male 22

To this player it was more important to be recognized as being a polite and friendly player than being a skilled player. But personally, I would claim that just being polite

will not help you progress in the game since people rather not group up again with players who are not skilled or fail to fill their role in a party or a raid as illustrated in my story in chapter 5. Then again, the hardcore guild I was in, had a special rank for people who were friends of the raiding members, but were kept only in the guild because they were nice, but denied raiding because they missed the necessary skills.

The survey also included the question if the players in some way looked up to hardcore players/ looked down on the casual/social players. Because of limitations of the virtual survey I was using (FreeOnlineSurvey.com) the questions did not change depending on what kind of playing style the participants had. However, when analyzing the data I found that 11 out of the 17 participants who categorized themselves as social, casual PvE or PvP in some way looked up to the hardcore players. In contrast, only 15 of the 29 participants who categorized themselves as hardcore PvE & PvP, hardcore PvP or hardcore PvE looked down on the casual social players. This data may show that casual players in some way see the hardcore players' success in the game as a motivational factor as I myself did, as shown in my allegory in chapter 5.

9. From casual to hardcore

In this chapter, I give insight into how a high-end raiding guild functions and the behavior and mentality of its members. I will also touch upon how a high-end guild works when it comes to leadership and organization. The officer chat and forum are restricted areas where the vast majority of members of the guild, not to talk about the majority of players of WoW do not have access to, as also pointed out by Yee (2003). Very few players get to be part of the culture that high-end game create and even fewer get to see what goes on in conversations among the leaders of the guild. It is important to note that the recollections, interviews and personal experiences are meant as examples, but from interviews with players of other high-end guilds, of which I was not a member of, many of the same trends can be seen in the sometimes military like and strict rules of these guilds.

9.1 Raiding guilds – organisms or organizations?

Researchers, e.g. Taylor (2003, 2006), argue that trust, respect and reputation are very important factors when it comes to building relationships in the virtual worlds. For only with relationships built on these traits can you exploit the whole of the game socially by gathering enough social capital to conquer the harder content of the game. Playing the game with no one to socialize with would quickly become a boring endeavor, and with no one to group up with, you will without no exceptions miss most of the content the game has to offer. A player with no one he knows will of course be able to join PUGs or pick up groups with strangers to play through the easier instances of a game but chances are that this person would never see the more complex and challenging raid instances. Karlsen (2009) gives a good explanation of why this is by explaining how the most challenging parts of a raid instance, the bosses, require a number of people whom all complement each other:

Only way to overcome boss challenges is by organizing the group play according to a strict division of labor (Karlsen 2009).

Not only do you need enough people, but the setup of different classes must also be thoroughly planned. It would, for example, be impossible to beat most boss encounters in any given raid instance in WoW if you only brought healer priests. Instead, the raidleader has to set up a raid formation in which all classes are included: damage dealers, healers and tanks. This becomes even more difficult the harder the bosses are. Some bosses require healing classes that can do good AoE healing, melee damagedealers or a tank with high armor mitigation like a druid. Other bosses, can call for completely different setup of classes to be overcome. This was especially true for the original WoW and The Burning Crusade expansion, whereas in the newest expansion, The Wrath of the Lich King, Blizzard saw the difficulties many guilds had to always have the right classes available so they attempted making the main classes more similar under the slogan: "Bring the player, not the class." (Official WoW site).

The above might suggest to a person unknown to WoW that as long as you bring a good setup of skilled players they will overcome the bosses in time. This could not be farther from the truth. The key to overcome hard bosses not only relies on a good setup but also a certain level of items on the players who aim to undertake raid instances. This is not true for the first released instances of an expansion (usually 5 man instances), but more than true for the later instances of each expansion. This statement can easily be exemplified by looking at how the raid instance Blackwing Lair in the original WoW could not be handled if the players in the raids that attempted it did not have a certain level of equipment. To be able to beat all the bosses in Blackwing Lair, the majority of the raiders undertaking them would have been required to raid the easier instance Molten Core (or first tier instance) for weeks or even months to be properly prepared when it came to gear to stand a chance. This is especially the case for tanks and healers; tanks, who are tanking the bosses, are required to have a large hit point pool, high avoidance stats and good armor mitigation, and healers who must be able to keep up with all the damage a boss does, need to have high spellpower, mana regeneration and a large mana pool. In the last time of original WoW and in the two expansions, it also became very important for damage dealing classes to have sufficient gear for the boss because enrage timers were implemented on almost all bosses. An enrage timer means that the boss has to be killed within a set time limit such as for instance 10 min. If the

boss is not killed within this time limit, it will wipe out the raid in a matter of seconds by doing damage which is impossible to heal.



Figure 9 A killshot of Vaelastrasz the corrupt, the second boss in Blackwing Lair.

A good example of a boss that required not only the raid to be skilled but also have good overall equipment was the second boss in Blackwing Lair (BWL), Vaelastrasz. A raid had 3 minutes to kill this boss, or the entire raid would ‘wipe’ (i.e. that everyone in the raid dies). Throughout the fight, the boss did tremendous amounts of damage to the entire raid, which made it necessary for both damage dealers as well as healers to push their limits. Because the type of damage the boss inflicted was fire, the raid also had to “gimp”¹⁹ themselves by equipping some pieces of fire resistance gear to be able to survive long enough. However, a key factor to defeating this boss was not only to have everything right strategy-wise, but it required the raid or the guild to have farmed the prior raid instance, Molten Core for weeks

¹⁹ “Gimping” refers to making your characters’ stats worse by equipping inferior items. Some fights require players to switch out their normal gear with gear that have magical resistances which has less of other stats.

or months to equip players with sufficiently good armor and weapons. However, a boss such as this, also known in player terms as “cockblock” or a “guildkiller” can be devastating for a guild as a whole. Trying for weeks without success to defeat a boss can often lead to members burning out and quitting the game, or make them join other guilds which are capable of killing the boss in question. Equipment is often a huge question and problem for the leaders/officers of the guild when a member quits the guild or the game. The reason why a member leave the guild also plays a major factor: If a member quits the guild due to personal reasons, the reaction from the guild will usually be sympathetic and everyone will wish him good luck and express how sad they are to see him or her go. If a member, on the other hand, quits the guild to join another, the reaction from other members will usually be completely different. Throughout my years in World of Warcraft, the action of abandoning your guild (and guildmembers) can best be described as virtual treason as this player who is an officer in his current guild indicates:

“I seriously hate those who leave the guild when we are having a hard time on a boss. It can almost be compared to an avalanche. If one player leaves the guild it will mean that we will have fewer people to attend raids. If the guild is low on people when one person of a key class quits all hell breaks loose cause it means that we might have to cancel raids. And if we cancel many raids, other people might get impatient cause they don’t get to raid making them join other guilds so they can play. It especially sucks if the guild has geared up players who quit. If the player just joined, it would be okay if he left cause then we would know early on that he is a retard and we avoid spending time, effort and loot on him. But if a player who has been in a guild for a long time quits, It’s just selfish and ungrateful...and he fucks over the entire guild. ” – Duke

Duke here expresses his irritation and frustration when a player quits the guild and how just one player leaving may have a severe negative impact on the entire guild. He is especially irritated if a lot of loot is invested in the player who decides to leave the guild. Casual guilds are usually small and just made up of a few good friends, but even a high-end guild can often prefer a smaller base of people for different reasons as this player explains:

“It is almost impossible to find just the right amount of people for a guild. If you take just like around thirty members²⁰, the guild will usually suffer if one or two people can’t attend on a raid one night making the raid not happen at all, and even more critical if someone quits for good. The good thing about having few people is that people will feel closer and learn better how to function together in a group.[...] A good thing is also that everyone gets geared up fast, since if you have a lot of people in the guild, we [the officers] will have to rotate between the players who gets to come along in the raid, this will make the loot more watered out or whatever since it has to be divided between a larger amount of people. And you can’t really prioritize loot to a few players like Heavens Devils did cause then the entire guild will start to break apart at some point.” – Rush

What we can see from this quote is that it can be hard to find the perfect amount of members to have in a raiding guild. A small base of players will make the raiding group more efficient since everyone knows each other both personally and with regards to way of playing. The raid instances will also become easier if the guild has chosen to have just a small core of players due to the fact that they will all get equipment at a fast rate, leading to an increase in their damage, healing power or other stats, making for e.g. boss encounters easier. The downside of a smaller base of players, is as Rush explained, that if as little as one or two players quit, it can make the entire guild as a raiding unit dysfunctional. If the guild decides to have a large base of players it will not be a huge issue if some players quit, because other players will be there to replace them. The biggest problem with having a huge base of players who want to raid is that there will always be someone who is not content with how much they get to raid. I was an officer during almost my entire raiding career in WoW, and it was my job to make a fair rotation so that all the tanks would be able to raid the same amount. This proved to be very hard at times. There will always be players who complain and claim that others players get more spots to raid than them. This may also be the case in some guilds, but this can often be explained by how the game functions: All

²⁰ Interview was conducted after Blizzard had changed the maximum amount of players allowed in a raid instance was 25.

bosses in raid instances have different lootables²¹. The randomness of this game function means that sometimes players will get lucky with regards to what items drop. In a raiding guild with many people who rotate between getting spots in the raids, this can lead to some being very lucky in the raid they got picked to participate in. This could often lead to that some players got better geared than others. For instance, some of the tanks I was organizing spots for would get lucky and have better gear than some of the others that were unlucky with the drops off a boss. This would often induce a bad circle with negative effects socially; when attempting new bosses, the other officers would often force me to take the best equipped tanks even if it wasn't their turn to raid. This was to optimize our chance to kill the new bosses, but this would in turn lead to that when we actually killed these bosses, the best geared would get even better geared while the tanks who had to sit down missed the opportunity to improve their equipment making them an even worse choice when again attempting new bosses. The other negative effect with this was that the best geared tanks also learned the encounter, making them the best choice when we had to clear an instance up to the next boss we hadn't killed instead of losing valuable time²² by taking an inferiorly equipped tank who would spend extra time learning the encounters as well. Bad circles such as this, created from social pressure and in-built game mechanics could often lead to drama within the guild and can best be paralleled with criticism of capitalism in the real world: "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." (Rieman 1979) For this could often be enough reason for the players who had to sit down repeatedly for raids, to make long posts in the guild's forums expressing how unfair they were being treated or in worst cases for some to quit as this player who left a post on the forum criticizing the guilds way of handling its members:

"Title: Goodbye.

Text: After some thinking I have considered to quit the guild. I am sure I am not gonna be missed. It was fun in the beginning when the guild wasn't so serious, but it seems like progress and loot have gotten to your heads. I have logged on every night for the

²¹ Some random trash mobs can also sometimes drop epic equipment in raid instances but this is a very low chance while bosses always have a 100% chance of dropping equipment.

²² Raid instances usually have a reset time of one week. If a raid doesn't clear the instance within this week, they would have to start on a fresh instance next week.

last three weeks to make myself available for raids but Ashnak [his classleader] doesn't even consider me when he does spots. I know my gear is pretty shit compared to the other healers, but how the hell can I get better gear if you never let me raid? I am tired of dropping everything in my hands in real life and log on just to get ignored. You never even give me a chance, and when you cancelled last night's raid cause you missed a tank when I was there ready to step in it just boiled over and I understand that I am not welcome in this guild anymore. So FU[Fuck you] officers, and <3[Love] to [lots of player nicks]. If you don't treat your members better even if they don't have the best of gear the entire guild will go to hell.

I will probably transfer to Tarren Mill to join my brothers guild, so you will get rid of me on the server as well.

- Sapphonx"

Throughout my time in WoW, posts such as this from frustrated members were bound to appear on relatively frequent basis. Many of the players who wrote these posts were often right that officers treated them unfair by giving raids spots to members who were better geared and were practiced at certain encounters. From an officers point of view, this was however often a necessary evil. A raiding guilds life is almost entirely based on the progress it makes and is in fact a "fragile social group" no matter how successful they may seem as Ducheneaut et al found out in their study "Life and death of online gaming communities: A look at guilds in World of Warcraft (2007)". The study also shows that a guild survives longer if it has many members, but will progress faster with fewer members supporting the argument that when loot is distributed to fewer members the guild will progress faster (in for example raiding instances), but has a lower chance of surviving as a guild in the long run. I think it is therefore important to look at this dilemma in more detail both from a social aspect and a gameplay aspect with loot as a crucial factor.

As I stated earlier, the necessary evil in a guild to let the undergeared players sit down for raids, while letting the good geared players raid in order for the guild to progress, makes research which states that social capital is the key to progression problematic.

I have specifically Taylors et al (2003, 2006) theory in mind as this chapter was introduced with. Taylor argues, to put it bluntly, that being a player with good reputation, which other players and the guild can rely on and that always have responsibility, and puts the guild/group before yourself will make you progress in the game. I will, however, argue that this is not always true, especially not in high-end raiding guilds. Although a player may have all these traits, he can get pushed aside in order for other players with better equipment to take his spot in raiding instances, even if he shows up every night with consumables and potions to raid. Again, I will use Sapphonx, who quit the guild because he felt (and was) neglected due to his poor equipment, as an example. As an officer this was necessary from a utilitarian²³ point of view. For the guild as a whole to progress it was often necessary to neglect guild policy rules of fairness and healthy rotations so that the guild would survive in the long run. Without progress, members of a guild will grow frustrated and leave for better guilds. Without progress, a high-end guild will also have a hard time finding new members who meet their standards and also want to join. For a player to want to join a serious high-end raiding guild, many factors are involved whether the guild seems attractive or not. A player looking for a guild to join will in most cases first be discontent with his former guild or the guild was discontent with the player. The most common reasons for this decision are as Ducheneaut et al. (2007) list are due to a broad combination of factors: Leadership style, game design, and drama/conflict between or with other members such as conflicts over loot. A study on addiction to World of Warcraft conducted by Linderoth et al (2008:60) offers a good example: A player leaves his guild after a conflict over DKP. He paid 900 DKP for a staff that dropped in a raid instance, but when checking the DKP list after the raid he finds that he was deducted 2000 DKP instead of 900. When he confronts the officers of the guild with the issue, they ignore it. This makes the player leave the guild out of frustration.

²³ "Utilitarianism: doctrine that the useful is the good; especially as elaborated by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill; the aim was said to be the greatest happiness for the greatest number" – Dictionary.com

9.2 Fun versus Work

A returning intriguing trend that I found among many hardcore players was that they often felt obliged to play even when they did not want to. This was also true for me when, I myself, was raiding every day. For the guild to be able to progress you felt that it was your duty to log on – the last thing you wanted was to skip a raid, and then get 39 other people the next day to say they were not able to raid because you did not show up.

Some players are key-players to whether or not the guild can progress – especially tanks and healers. All high-end raiding guilds, almost with no exceptions, elect one player to be their main tank. The main tank has the prestigious task of holding agro on bosses, but in order to do this, he will also need the best gear to withstand the huge amounts of damage bosses deal. Therefore the main tank gets prioritized when it comes to loot. This means that whenever a tanking piece of equipment drops in a raid instance, the main tank will get it regardless of much DKP he has. This may seem attractive from a gaming point of view, but can also be a burden as I personally experienced. Because I got all this equipment, I also felt obliged to be there for every raid since the other members were dependant on me to kill bosses. How players feel obliged to play even when they do not want to is described by Yee in his article “The Labor of Fun”. (2006). In the article Yee foregrounds how play often can feel more like work than fun in MMORPGs:

The central irony of MMORPGs is that they are advertised as worlds to escape to after coming home from work, but they too make us work and burn us out. For some players, their game play might be more stressful and demanding than their actual jobs. (Yee 2006)

The boundaries between work and fun are often blurred in video games such as WoW. To be able to succeed in a MMORPG the player has to undertake repetitive, monotonous and time-consuming processes such as farming gold/mobs, leveling professions, attain best upgrades for gear. If a player is part of a raiding guild as well,

the amount of time and work that have to be invested in the game can be overwhelming and can lead to players burning out as illustrated by my informant Sopranos earlier in the thesis. A high-end raiding guild will require its member to put aside their own individual goals, and mainly focus of the goal of the guild as a whole. This goal usually involves beating raiding instances which may require members to raid every day for several hours. Raiding members are required to read up on forums and know every tactic and strategy for bosses, as well as knowing how to push their characters abilities to the limit in terms of healing, tanking, or dealing damage. All this can be experienced by work instead of fun, but is supposed to get justified when the guild attains the goal it set out to reach like killing a specifically hard boss. Problem is that the game is never-ending, and there will always be a new raiding instance or a new hard boss which requires hours of preparation before raids.

10. Loot craze

10.1 Loot as a component of gameplay

Equipment or loot is a huge part of World of Warcraft for many players and I have found that it is perhaps the most influential game mechanic with regards to a player's social capital. Loot affects a social capital in both negative and positive ways, and is an important issue when one tries to understand how social networking functions in WoW. Yet surprisingly, very little research has been conducted within the area of loot. Taylor (2003) argues that the key to successful networking and progression in the game is based on trust, responsibility and reputation. This is a valid argument; that no one wants to maintain a relationship or play with a person who does not inhabit these traits. I will, on the contrary to Taylors argument, argue that these traits often can be neglected or put aside for factors such as how well-equipped a player is, as shown in the previous chapter. The most extensive research done on the topic is Yee's (2008)²⁴ study where he has interviewed players from different MMOs about the social benefits and problems loot can create. He has, however, not analyzed in detail how the loot system function as an emergent system of the game.

"When we first start out a new instance it's fun because of the challenge and experience in itself but you continue doing it for weeks even if it's more boring than shoveling shit to get your full set or all the best upgrades of gear" - Seraphim

Most players in World of Warcraft refer to equipment as 'gear'. What armor or you're your character is equipped with reflect to players in the game-world how powerful friend or adversary you are. Teaming up with a good-gearred player can sometimes make hard encounters seem trivial, and battling a player of the opposing faction the same level as you although with better gear, can sometimes seem cruelly unfair. Every character has different armor and weapon slots for different body parts like chest, shoulder, head, right hand, left hand etc. The class in which your character belongs decides what types of armor and

²⁴ <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001337.php>

weapons your character can wear and wield. WoW has four different armor types: cloth, leather, mail and plate. A character of the mage class can, for example, only wear cloth items, while a warrior wears plate. This is a decision made by Blizzard Interactive to balance the classes. Because mages can dish out huge damage, their trade-off is that they cannot take lot of physical damage due to their restriction to only wear cloth armor. A character in plate will, however, take just as much damage from magical attacks as a character in cloth since the armor types only is in cohesion with physical damage (melee attacks). The balance between how much damage a class can dish out versus how much or little he takes in return has often been a heatedly debated topic on official WoW forums where players often disagree with the developers how a class' offensive abilities are not in balance with their defensive abilities. Here is an example posted by a player with a death knight character who thinks mages are too powerful:

"Wow, blizzard sure did hand you guys a ton of buffs in the expansion. I guess all that whining and crying finally paid off eh? Don't you find it a bit too easy to play a class with so many ways to avoid damage while at the same time dish out massive burst? I'm not even talking about arcane mages either, hell a mage could run around without talents and still own." – Player, World of Warcraft Official Forums

Sometimes this kind of feedback also bears fruit for players, and they are able to influence the gameplay mechanics. For example in the beta testing of WoW the hunter class was able to wear plate armor. Players and QA testers agreed that the hunters damage output was too high to have the luxury of also being able to wear plate, so Blizzard limited the hunter class to wear mail armor.

Items in WoW are divided into 6 different quality categories: poor, common, uncommon, rare, epic and legendary. These categories are also easier set apart by the color of the items name gray, white, green, blue, purple and orange. Many players refer to the colors instead of the category names, for instance, if someone refers to another player as "in greens", it means his gear is primarily dominated by uncommon armor pieces. If a character on the other hand is "in purples", it means he is in epic equipment.

A player beginning a freshly created character starts off with only a few armorpieces of poor quality. By doing quests and killing mobs, he will be rewarded with better items. The first quest of the games rewards the player upon completion with some common/white armorpieces and weapons. As the player progresses in levels, the quality of the quest rewards items are usually uncommon/green. There are only a few quests, which are usually long chain quests and relatively hard, which reward the player with items of blue/rare quality. Items of epic quality are attained by either doing PvP or raiding.²⁵ To get epic items through PvP the player has to trade off huge amounts of honor points and arena points won by killing and winning PvP battlegrounds and arena games. To gather enough honor points to buy an epic belt can take up to more than ten hours. Getting a full epic set by raiding can sometimes take up to half a year of constant raiding; this is because every boss in the raid instances have a loot table and getting the item you need is based on a drop chance. Even if the item you want drops, there are still other players in the raid who most likely want the same item as you. The random loot tables can often lead to frustration for many, as a player's quote below illustrates. In this example the boss does not drop his class specific shoulders after 8 weeks:

"JESUS FUCK! If they [the shoulder item] don't drop next week I am gonna fuckin quit the game! Mage and lock crap all the fuckin time ffs[for fuck's sake]"

Being in greens or uncommon gear only can be a cause for bullying in World of Warcraft, in the same way a kid in weird clothes might be picked on at school. If a player only wears greens, this is for an indication for many players that this player is not good at playing the game or/and that he has not got the connections to get other players to help him get better gear. A player wearing purple or epic armor on the other hand is easily spotted and recognized as a raider or a hardcore PvPer.

Items can often be the main cause of conflict among many players in WoW. These kind of conflicts are most common when you team up with players in so-called pick-up groups or

²⁵ In The Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich king a player can also buy epic items from factions by getting exalted reputation with that faction.

“pugs”. To further explain, this I will now give a short description of how loot is handled in WoW.

When a player invited other people to join him in beating an instance he or she is made the leader. This is indicated by a small crown item on the player’s portrait in the interface. Being the leader of a party or raid, this player is also given the option to right click his own portrait to configure the loot options for the whole party. The most common thing to do while in 5-man parties is to leave the default loot system on. This means that whenever a green or better item drops from a mob or chest, a dialogue box with two buttons marked need and greed and an X pops up on everyone in the party’s screen. If you click need, the philosophy behind it is that you actually need and will benefit from this item, and that is better than what you already have. If you press ‘greed’ on the other hand, it usually means you will only sell the item for money. By clicking ‘X’ you will pass on the item. If more people press ‘need’ or ‘greed’, the game will roll a random number from 1-100 and whoever gets the highest number wins the item. If only one person presses ‘need’ and all the other players press ‘greed’ – the player who needed the item will win it automatically. The second most used loot option is the master looter preset. This option is mostly used in raids and means that the raid leader (or the loot master if the leader chooses another player to handle the loot) decides who gets items when they drop.

If one has played WoW and done some instances with pugs, one is bound to come across party leaders who misuse their ability to distribute the loot. A classic example is the scenario where the party fights a boss and the party leader needs an item that drops off the boss. The party leader then sets the loot option to master looter and gives the item to himself if it drops avoiding the chance of having to lose it to someone else if he has to roll. Other players who do not need an item and but even so press need are also frowned upon in WoW. This kind of behavior can lead to a bad reputation and is commonly known as “ninjaing” in the WoW community. Being a “ninja” or even being accused of being one is perhaps the worst insult one can receive in the game because it can give you a bad reputation to the extent that players will not group with you in the future as also Taylor et al. (2003) illustrates. Sometimes if a player is “ninjaing an item this may lead to being added to a “blacklist”

hosted on a forum dedicated to the server you are playing on. The progress of being “blacklisted” can often be compared to that of a real court: A player accuses another one of being a ninja – this will again lead to a discussion among players (a jury) who often were not even there when the incident occurred if what the accused really did was “ninjaing” or a mistake. The accused player often pleads his case in this round of discussion. If enough players in the discussion agree that what the accused did was “ninjaing” a moderator or the owner (the judge) of the blacklisting thread will add him to the blacklist. But to even accuse a person of being a “ninja”, evidence in form of a screenshot of the misdeed is usually required. Below is the chat from one of the screenshot that was posted in a blacklist thread. The chat is from the point where Starque, a rogue and the master looter links the item that drops; is a sword called the Skullforge reaver.

Starque: [Skullforge Reaver]

Tigger: Wildheart plz god!

Starque: I will ninja it!

Hinate: yes

Steelfury rolls 17

Starque: I promise

Hinate rolls 100

Starque: Rogue WEP!!![weapon]

Hinate: YES

Starque: im serious

Starque rolls 8

Hinate: OMFG [Oh my fucking god]

Hinate: Give me the sworde

Tigger: Why wont he just drop those wildheart pants? : (

Starque receives loot: [Skullforge Reaver]

Saracan: ninja

Tigger: I hate baron

Hinate: O,MFG

Starque: FU [Fuck you] no WARRIOR

Ironfury: I need legs

Hinate: omfg

Starque: ROGUE

Starque: FFS

Tigger: Omfg

Hinate: You fuck

As one can see above the master looter Sarque misuses his authority as a raid leader giving the item to himself because he is determined that the sword is meant for the rogue class which he plays and not for the warrior class who the “highest roller” Hinate is playing. But by wrongfully taking the sword Sarque suffered serious consequences due to the fact that his name was added to the blacklist on the server’s unofficial forum and his reputation as a “teampayer” destroyed. This example happened two years ago when it was impossible to change the name of your character, and the only way for many “ninjas” was to transfer to another server and start with their reputation unstained though with no social networks on the new server. Players who the “ninjas” considered friends were likely to distance themselves by stopping grouping with the blacklisted player so they themselves won’t be associated with “ninjaing” or unfair play. Unfair play (not cheating) is legal by Blizzard code of conduct and players “stealing items” are not punished by being banned or suspended from the game, but they suffer instead the risk of being frozen out by their in-game friends. The option to be the master looter and give yourself the item, even if it is not considered yours by social norms held by most players, is a mechanic that is consciously put there by developers. In the next section I will explain how most serious guilds reduce the risk of “ninjaing” and how they go beyond the built-in game mechanics to distribute loot evenly.

10.2 Distribution of loot

Guilds which run raid instances rarely use the in-built loot system of rolling as described above. The most common thing to use is a DKP system. DKP stands for Dragon kill point

system and the first DKP system was originally designed for Sony's Everquest MMO for large guilds to distribute items fairly based on each player's attendance and effort²⁶. There are different ways to utilize this system but basically it is a server-driven program that you can install on an Internet domain (site) on which all the guilds raiding members are registered. This can only be done by a chosen administrator.

For players in high-end raiding guilds to get an item that is usually dropped by a raid instance boss upon its death, the master looter of the raid will link the item in the raid chat. The players who want this item then whisper the master looter which then checks the DKP standings of all the players who whispered him. The player who has the highest DKP then "wins" or gets the item, but will pay a set value of his DKP for it. Better items usually have higher values. The values are usually set by the officers of the guild or based on a certain percentage of a player total DKP. The rules on how a guild uses the DKP system can vary, for example, members will bid against each other using their DKP as money parallel to a real life auction. This might seem like a fair system compared to the rolling system, where luck is the deciding factor, but how a player uses his or her DKP can often have social consequences. As a player I often came across players/guildmembers who "hogged" their DKP. If a player is described as "DKP hogger", it means he saves up all his DKP and never uses any of it on items that drop, even if it involves an upgrade for him. He will then hold on to his DKP for weeks or months until a specific item drops that is much better than any of the others (this item is usually dropped by the last boss, and has a low drop chance). A raiding guild usually "farms" an instance for a couple of months for all the raiding members to get them ready when it comes to equipment for the next and harder instance. This means that the player who is hogging DKP will naturally get the one item he has been saving up for, but because this item has taken so many raids to get, he will have accumulated a significant amount of DKP compared to the other raiders who have spent DKP along the way on all item upgrades. And when the "DKP hogger" gets the one item he has been saving up for, he will still have a lot of DKP, meaning that he can pick up almost every other item he wants, because he still has most DKP, and sometimes he will even get items for free, since all the other players would have already gotten it by spending DKP on it while learning and farming the instance. The

²⁶ <http://eqdkp.com/?p=about>

behavior of hogging is frowned upon by many raiders, simply because the “hogger” puts himself in front of the guild. He will not spend DKP before he gets the most superior item(s) he wants, making him poorly equipped and not willing to gradually upgrade his gear to easier overcome new bosses for the guild. An example of this happened during a raid I attended in the 40 player instance of Naxxramas: A player of the warlock class was saving up all his DKP for the chest armorpiece of the warlock set which dropped from one of the last bosses in the instance. He refused to spend all his DKP on upgrades, scared not to be the first who got the chest. This lead to that whenever he left the ventrilo channel, the other warlock and mage players would say negative things about him because they thought he was being inequitable.

11. The Importance of Loot

11.1 Gaining social status through gear

What equipment you have decides how powerful your character is and also how it looks. The better the equipment the more glowing and shiny it will usually look. An epic armor set is usually uniquely designed with glowing shoulders and a helm and can be spotted by other characters from a far; i.e. the better equipment you have will also distinguish your character more from the thousands of other players on a realm/server. For instance if a player acquired the legendary sword Thunderfury, he or she would almost be impossible to miss by other players in the vicinity, since the sword left a trail of lightning whenever the player with it moved his character. For many players, the hunt for new and better equipment is not just to make their character's stats improve, but also to gain status among other players as an informant describes:

"Getting tf [Thunderfury] was probably the best moment ive had in wow. I think half of the server was there to see me, and I was in the middle of it. And when I ported back to if[Ironforge] everyone got around me lol[Laughing out loud]"

What equipment or loot you wear is far from important with regards to your characters look and stats, it also reflects if you are a skilled player and what achievements you have undertaken. This is true both for PvE and PvP players. For example will 0,5% of the highest ranked players competing in the PvP arenas be rewarded with a unique flying mount together with a gladiator title each season. Flying around on this mount works as a token and a trophy showing how skilled they are. In the guild I was in there were many active "hardcore" PvPers and instead of telling everyone in the guild how they wanted to be the highest ranked, they often just talked about how badly they wanted the mount:

[Noom]: srsly[Seriously] laffe, every time I log on you are doing arena. Time to take a break?

[Laffe]: noooo we are just 30 rating away from getting the mount : (i missed it by 14 rating last season no way I am gonna miss it now even if I have to stay awake for a week

[Ashtra]: arena sucks.

[Laffe]: Thats cause you suck at it :P

As shown here from this excerpt from a conversation in the guildchat, Laffe the PvPer is almost obsessed by getting the mount reward. The mount itself was not better in any way than the mount Laffe currently used but he wanted to get it to be able to ride around on it and show everyone how good he was at PvPing. The mount he already had was easily bought for gold and was owned by thousands of other players making it mundane. Laffe did actually end up getting the mount and would often just walk around on it in crowded places to show off to other players to gain social status. Getting virtual items to gain social status is also observed by Sherlock (2007) in his study of how social networking functions in World of Warcraft. Virtual status symbols and their effects can be compared to status symbols in the real world: If a person would get a well-paid job, and he was able to afford a Ferrari, chances are that this person would use this Ferrari not only to drive to places he needed to go, but also drive around with no real destination just to show off. Equipment as a status symbol comes perhaps more into play when it comes to PvE players or so called raiders. Pieces of equipment rewarded from raid instances by killing bosses are easily distinguishable from per say equipment a player can get as rewards for completing a quest or looted off a normal mob in the world zones. These pieces of equipment are usually of green or at best blue quality²⁷ and usually have a boring design with dull textures with no glowing effects to make them stand out. Players dressed in poor equipment such as this is commonly by the hardcore community of the game referred to as “noobs”.

Gear can also affect your status in the gaming community outside the game. One example of this is the official forums; for example in threads were raid instances or game mechanics are

²⁷ It can however happen that a normal mob drops a so-called world epic: A piece of equipment of epic quality. But the chance for this is minimal with only 0.01% chance. And these “world epics” are usually inferior to the equipment a player can obtain by killing bosses in a raid instance.

discussed, a poorly equipped player would get very little attention or recognition if he posted his opinion or advice. This would be because his gear would show that he hadn't progressed enough in the game to be good enough to give advice or share opinions to other players.²⁸ Most other players would be of the opinion that If he knew what he was talking about, he would also have required better gear by conquering hard instances (unless he was posting on an alt.)



Figure 10 The casual. A level 80 druid.

²⁸ A players gear can easily be checked through the armory website. (<http://armory.wow-europe.com>, <http://armory.worldofwarcraft.com>).



Figure 11 The hardcore. A level 80 warrior.

If we compare the two pictures above we can see how the casual (figure 9) is easily recognized in mundane looking equipment put together by different kinds of blue and green armor pieces s/he has gotten as quest rewards or bought off the AH, while the hardcore (figure 10) is equipped in a full epic armor set with more distinct shapes and glow effects. The hardcore player state from his equipment alone that he is a powerful player. Whom would you rather have as a teammate? If you saw these two players for the first time, not knowing either one of them – the natural choice would be in the best gear. Not only would he be able to kill monsters faster (or tank or heal), he would also from his gear represent that he knew the game and its mechanics well, while the player in poor gear would portray a person of lesser skill and knowledge. The hardcore player's gear is also impossible to retrieve without killing bosses in a raiding instance, meaning that he play the game in collaboration

with other skilled players. How a player is viewed and how he views others is an important part of understanding social interaction in MMORPGs and is explained in detail in the next section.

11.2 Understanding social interaction by self-other dynamics

In the article “Understanding Social Interaction in World of Warcraft”, Chen et al. (2007) make an attempt to map out how social interaction can be understood by the self-other dynamic together with contextual factors such as in-game spatiality, (the term spatiality is still problematic when used in computer games as illustrated by Aarseth (2000), but can in this thesis be understood as the virtual space of the game in order to avoid complications) historical context (i.e. player’s gaming history, progression of the game server etc) and level of social aggregation. Kolo et al. (2004) define social aggregation on three levels: (1) specific motivations or strategies used for players on a micro-level (2) Social aspects of formations such as guilds on a meso-level and (3) social aspects of the whole community of the game on a macro-level. The self-other dynamic can be explained as how the player itself views himself among others in the virtual world, and how he expresses his view about other players. This dynamic is important in order to understand why many players spend weeks or months in a raid instance to be able to get epic items to project a certain image of success and skill to other players. Chen et al describes this dynamics and its forms, but pay little attention to what positive or negative effects the different forms of social interaction can entail. I have therefore analyzed each of these forms of self-other dynamic in order to show what forms of social interaction there are, but also more importantly, how the different forms can impact the player’s social status .

The different forms of self-other dynamic have been divided into two: how the player sees himself and how the player sees other people. How the player sees himself is again divided

into three different forms: Staging oneself, gaze and superiority. The example above with Laffe standing in crowded places of the game world to show off his skills by showing off his mount is a perfect example of what staging oneself means. Staging oneself can best be described as a kind of silent social interaction where players just place their character or avatar in the middle of a crowded place so that others can admire their feats and achievements by looking at them or by using the inspect function.²⁹ It can on the other hand also induce envy and irritation in players: It is not unusual to see players who know each other stand (or sit) in a circle in a major city just to chat and a well-gear player walks into the middle of this circle to get attention. Staging oneself can in other words both have positive and negative consequences: You can be admired, but you can also be an element of envy or irritation.

The most prevalent form of interaction in WoW according to Chen et al. (2007) is the “spectorial” element of socialization categorized as *gaze*. Gaze or gazing refers to when a player just observes other players; either by looking at other players characters, watching others duels, chat or write in the different trade or chat channels. There is however one form of observation that can have a huge impact on other players even though observation seems like an innocent form of interaction. For instance if a player just stands idly by while another player gets killed by a mob or another player of the opposing faction without helping this can have negative social consequences. A normal reaction to this passive behavior is that the player who got killed will whisper you to express his irritation and frustration that observer did not help him. A worse reaction, which happens more rarely is that the offended player will write in the zone chat channels that the player who stood idly by is not a person you can rely on. This is a way of harming the idle players reputation as a way of revenge, so that other players in the zone will more reluctantly group up with him. The worst case scenario is that the idle observer might want to join a guild, but is denied membership because the act is remembered by one of the members of that guild. The guild member will inform the leaders of the guild that the observing player is not a team player thus destroying an opportunity for the observer to experience new content and get better

²⁹ By inspecting another player with the inspect function you can see that players equipment and how he has allocated his points in the talent tree.

gear if the guild he applied to was a raiding one. This might be an extreme example, but not in any way unrealistic.

The third form of social interaction of how player view themselves is the *superiority* category. As Chen et al (2007) points out, games are competitive, and by showing others how successful we are we display our own superiority. In what ways players show their superiority can vary, but the most common ways include: *Authoritarian acts* (for example an officer or guild master of a guild display their powers by demoting, promoting or kicking other members. Another example of authoritarian acts is by giving advice on how other people should play), *skill competition* (for example when players compare their skills in killing mobs or who has the best equipment.), *familiarity with game characters* (for example if two players argue over what class is the best healer.) and *reinforcing encounters* (for example for a high-level player to help a low-level player with tasks or items. These social interactions boost the helping player's ego and make them feel superior.)

The social interaction of *superiority* is most central when it comes to loot; this act of showing that you are better than others can be linked with that of staging oneself. For example if a player walks around in one of the game's cities to show off his gear, he will also feel that he is superior to the players with inferior gear. By having better gear, it will be a proof that he has completed more of the game's content, therefore having progressed farther and are better at playing the game.

The ways people express their views about others is another element that constructs social interaction (Chen et al 2007). To understand the social interaction and how players express their views about other players is an important element of why gear can give and represent status in an MMO. How do other players view players with far better gear than them? And how does for example a player equipped with only epic items view a player in "greens"? How a player views other players can be divided into two categories: *View of the individual other* and *view of the collective other*.

The *view of the individual other* can be divided into two typical ways encounters can take form. The first kinds of encounters are the other-reinforcing-encounters; these are encounters that boost the Other's self conception mostly by giving other players

compliments on their equipment, how well they play or asking them for advice. This can also work as a motivation factor for many players, as most players thrive to be recognized as good players in the eyes of other as my survey also supports. The easiest and most noticeable way for others to see your success in the game is your equipment. If you have for example a weapon from the last boss in the hardest instance at the time – this is proof you have cleared this instance and of your knowledge of the game’s mechanics. It also shows that you are a good team player since such an instance can only be handled by a good guild with members who know how to execute complex boss strategies together. The other-reinforcing-encounters can also work in the opposite way with negative social consequences for example if a player insults another player by telling him how bad he is at the game or mocks equipment (which is also an indirect way of saying that the player isn’t good at the game). Insults such as these can be a catalyst for getting better at playing the game as I personally experienced.

A players *view of the collective other*, or how he views himself relative to larger groups of players/a community; a player can either feel that he belong to a community or that he is an outsider. A player will often feel a certain belonging to his own guild and its members. This sense of belonging will make the player view himself as part of “the collective other”; placing the guilds goals and needs above his own For example would a player who feels this belonging give items to other members who would benefit more from them. A player who does not feel this belonging would on the contrary put his own goals and needs above the guilds or other players. This can lead to the act of “ninjaing” items as shown above, which could have severe negative consequences for a player.

11.3 A new era every day

Research on MMOs can in most cases only work as temporal due to the fact that players evolve and change their playing style as the game and servers mature. The developers can also change how a game is played and perceived by adding new content, game mechanics and functionality or by changing them. Research, such as my own, on for example loot can

therefore only give a temporary picture of how loot affects players and vice versa; for instance will gear or loot as a status symbol have lost some of its significance in the latest expansion Wrath of the Lich King because of the achievement system described earlier in my thesis. By killing hard bosses in raids, player can gain proofs of this by being rewarded with achievement unlocks in the system. Unlocking some achievements will reward the players with titles, mounts, tabard or pets. Conquering a dungeon in the most difficult way (Hard modes in dungeons were recently implemented in the game) will for instance give a player a specific title. A player displaying this title will show everyone in the game how skillful he is, in the same way as loot does. The title will also act as a symbol, which shows that the player is one who is worth adding to one's social capital. This illustrates how the game is constantly changing, and how new game mechanics can change the way social interaction functions.

12. Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have investigated how game mechanics influence the social aspects of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game World of Warcraft. To narrow down the topic, I have focused on social status and hierarchies within the game. Central to my thesis has been to answer and investigate the following three research questions:

- 1. How do social hierarchies and status work as components of the game? Is this component more present and influencing for hardcore players and does it affect all types of players in the same way?*
- 2. What are the negative and positive effects of such a component in gameplay? How does more traditional gameplay elements such as loot influence social hierarchies and vice versa?*
- 3. To what extent is social status a motivation factor for players of WoW? Are social hierarchies a gameplay component that is working as a two-edged sword and what would in that case be the reasons for this?*

I have approached the questions both methodologically and theoretically. I have primarily attempted to map out how game mechanics and social aspects emerge and affect gameplay in WoW by conducting a virtual ethnography with a special focus on three layers of the game: Gameplay, functionality and socio-culture, as recommended by Aarseth (2003). The ethnography has been conducted by playing the game extensively over four years, carefully both observing and interacting with the game world and other players. My findings have also been based on a series of in-depth interviews and a survey.

I feel I have seen all aspects of the game when it comes to content and game mechanics; questing, leveling, grinding, doing 5-man parties, raiding and PvP. From a sociological point

of view, I have predominantly experienced the social interaction that is present in high-end raiding guilds and relationships between so called “hardcore” gamers and how they view casual gamers. My own experience of how casual players view hardcore players is limited since I started to raid high-end content fairly early in my WoW career. However, through my own story of how I became a high-end raider and an officer presented in chapter 5, I have described how I as a casual player viewed hardcore players and how they contributed to form my motivations for playing the game.

Many studies on MMOs focus on the social aspects of the game and how other players in the game can be seen as friends in the same fashion as real life friends, and that the social aspects can be a dominant factor of why so much time is invested in the game. In my study however, I found that the social aspects must to a much bigger extent be seen in light of the game mechanics as Karlsen (2009) calls for. It is important to remember that World of Warcraft is, first and foremost, a game and most players join the game world primarily to play and that socializing comes second. Play in more traditional games involves a huge factor of competitiveness as stated by Chen et al. (2007). The problem with MMOs such as World of Warcraft is that the game has no defined goal as it is open-ended and neverending. As I have shown through my study, researchers must be careful of neglecting this competitiveness, as it is still there, even if the form of it has evolved. There is no real way to “win” the game, but most of the game mechanics induce the players to compete. In PvP or Player-versus-Player, the competing factor is most distinguishable as players here battle against each other. In PvE or Player versus Environment such as raiding, this competitiveness between players may be harder to spot. It is undeniably there, especially for those players in high-end raiding guilds. This assessment can be supported by Elizabeth Reid’s (1999) study of social control in cyberspace where she observes players of multi user online games’ wish for influence and power. Whereas players of MUDs can rise in a hierarchy where each rank may grant increasing ability to shape the game universe game mechanically by adding content etc. (Some players of MUDs even rise to the rank/position of developer) (Karlsen 2009), the hierarchy in World of Warcraft is more based on gaining social status by joining successful raiding guilds, and through them improve one’s virtual character for instance by receiving loot. As World of Warcraft is a visual MMO, in contrast to MUDs, social status and rise in the

hierarchy can be gained by players when other player's recognize how well-equipped that player's character is or what guild they belong to.

I have through my study of loot and how it affects the social aspects of the game answered the second research question (2); Equipment or loot do not only affect the characters game mechanical abilities such as damage, it also reflects the player's skill. This projected image of skill through equipment may influence social capital as the requirement to get the best equipment in game is only available through collaboration with other people. Game mechanics, in the form of equipment, as it gained through a joint effort of players can lead to both positive and negative effects. The positive effects are that a player will be recognized as skilled if he is well-equipped, and that he then in turn will have an easier time getting groups or other people wanting to play with him. The negative effects, i.e. the equipment received in a guild through raiding, may be seen as property belonging to the entire guild. To have the right to this property, players often feel the obligation to spend more time in the game than they want to. Players often feel that the guild of which they are a part puts the individual player's motivational factors in the game aside, in order for the guild to progress as a whole. This is a common thing in MMORPG and can lead to players feeling that the game is more work than play as their individual goals and ways to have fun in the game get pushed aside as described in Yee's article "The Labor of Fun". (2006).

I have shown through discussion and analysis of my own empirical data and other research on the subject that social status and hierarchies can also work as motivation factors for players; many players strive toward the goal that their character/avatar in the game universe as well as in the community (forums, sites related to the game etc.) stand out among the thousands of other players on the server. This can be done by joining a successful high-end raiding guild in order to tackle the hardest instances in the game and therefore showing your worth to the guild, as well as the player community on the server and the many communities related to the game existing on forums and other mediums.

Social hierarchies do to a relative extent both affect casual and hardcore players, but this is, however, also based on a player's motivations in the game. I have shown through my study that for many players, especially for raiders, a dominating goal is to build up status and

recognition in order to demonstrate to others (and often also themselves as shown through the self-other dynamic) that they are successful players and superior to others. The negative effects of such a hierarchy based on achievements, status and gear are that like in a real world society, the game will produce social outcasts and losers that can be bullied with that leads me to the next research question.

I have answered my third research question (3) by showing that social success in the game, i.e. the server's community, does come at a price, and may be seen as a two-edged sword. As illustrated earlier, social status and success in the game are in most cases gained through beating content (PvE) or excelling (PvP) at a high level in the game. This content, almost with no exceptions, require you to group up with other players to form interdependent networks over a longer period of time. The interdependency of these networks with other players, may again force the player to spend time in/with the game even when not desired. The more social success you gain, and your social capital increases, the more you will be able to progress as most components in the game require you group up with other players. This requirement does, however, go both ways; as you are dependent on other players, so are they dependent on you in order to progress. Failing or ignoring to help players of your social network can have severe social consequences within the game, which in turn may hinder your progression in the game. A vast social network will therefore, by the way the game is designed, often require the player again to set his own desires in the game aside. To progress in the game, you will as Taylor et al.(2003, 2006) argue be required to form social networks, but these same networks will remove much of the fun in the game as well. For guilds it can be a problem to gather enough players, each with their own individual goals, in order to raid. Players enter the game primarily to have fun, but the components of the game force them to get "friends" and build social networks in order to progress even if they want to or not. This leaves the question whether game mechanics affecting social aspects are overrated. You may become a virtual hero if you gain enough social capital, learn all the game mechanics, spend an excessive amount of time in the game and are willing to put other's goals in front of your own. Some may even gain some "friends" in the progress of becoming a virtual hero, but are they really your friends as Taylor (2006) so diligently asserts?

To end this thesis with a cliché: “With great powers comes great responsibility”. (Lee, 1962).
Do we really want all that responsibility in a “game”, or should we go back to carelessly jumping on mushrooms?

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Appendix I - Survey

1) Gender: Male,

Female

2) Age: 12 – 16

16 – 18

18 – 24

24 – 28

28 – 35

35 – 40

40 +

3) How long have you played WoW?

Less than 6 months

6 – 12 months

1 – 2 years

2 – 3 years

3 years or more

4) In what kind of category would you put yourself?

Social/casual – Only logging in to talk with friends/other players

Casual PvE - (Quests, 5-man instances, easy raid instances)

Casual PvP – (Battlegrounds, rating under 2000 in the arena)

Hardcore PvE – (Raiding the hardest instances)

Hardcore PvP – (Battlegrounds, Rating over 2000 in the arena)

Hardcore PvP and PvE (Raiding the hardest instances, battlegrounds and rating over 2000 in the arena)

5) Is it important for you that other players recognize you as a good player?

Yes

No

6) Do you think that social status is important for players in WoW?

Yes

No

7) Do you look down on social/casual players? (Check null if you are a casual/social, Casual PvEr or Casual PvPer)

Yes

No

Null

8) Do you look up to hardcore players? (Check null if you are a Hardcore PvEr, Hardcore PvPer, or Hardcore PvPer and PvEr)

Yes

No

Null

